WITH JOFFRE AT VERDUN

CAPT BRERETON

BLACKIE & SON LTD

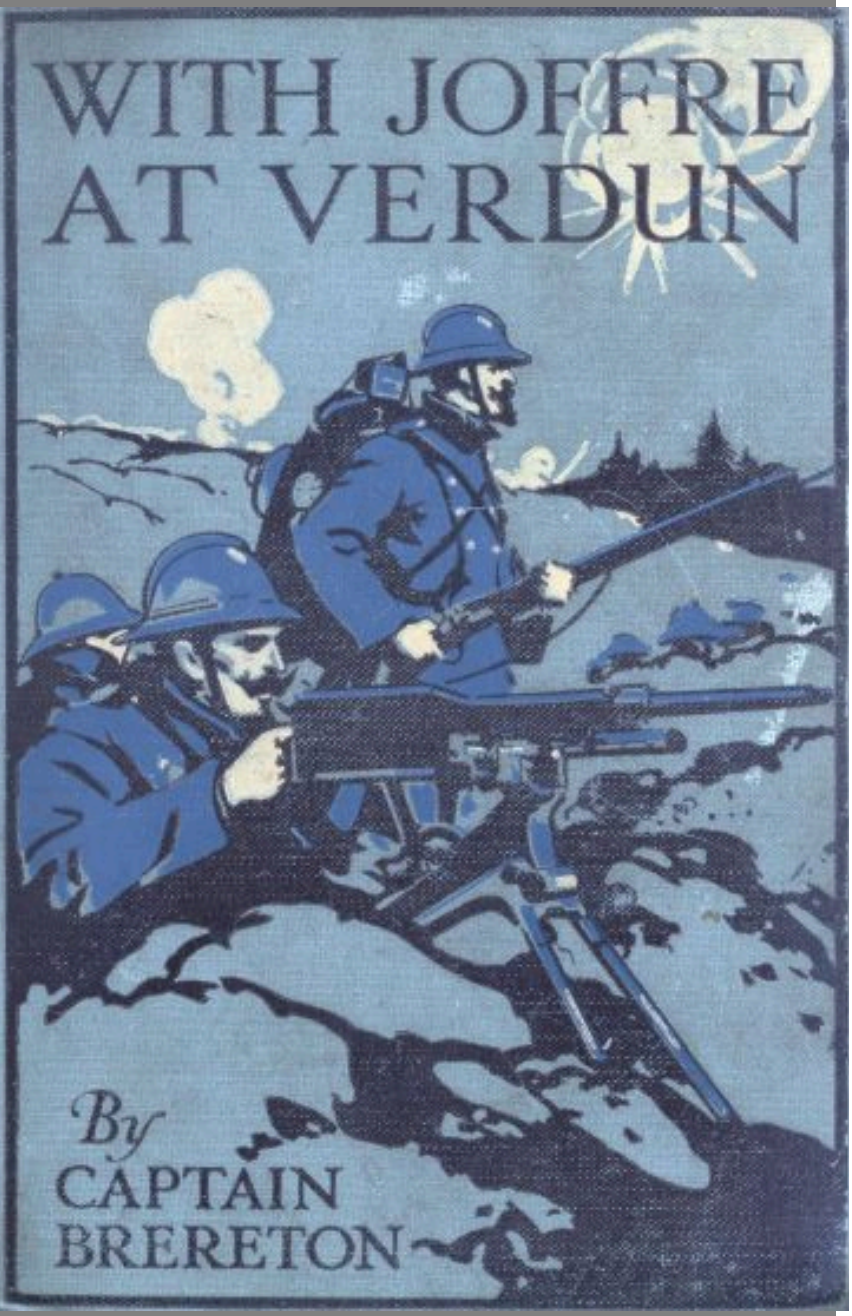
WITH JOFFRE AT VERDUN

By CAPTAIN BRERETON

WITH
JOFFRE
AT
VERDUN
CAPT BRERETON

BLACKIE & SON LTD

WITH JOFFRE AT VERDUN



By
CAPTAIN
BRERETON

The Project Gutenberg eBook of With Joffre at Verdun: A Story of the Western Front

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: With Joffre at Verdun: A Story of the Western Front

Author: F. S. Brereton

Illustrator: Archibald Webb

Release date: December 28, 2009 [eBook #30791]
Most recently updated: January 5, 2021

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/30791

Credits: Produced by Al Haines

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WITH JOFFRE AT VERDUN: A STORY OF THE WESTERN FRONT ***

**[Frontispiece: "THE SERGEANT OF HENRI'S PLATOON, ONE ARM DANGLING
HELPLESS BY HIS SIDE, STRETCHED OUT A BRAWNY HAND AND GRIPPED OUR
HERO'S" (missing from book)]**

With Joffre at Verdun

A Story of the Western Front

BY

LT.-COL. F. S. BRERETON

Author of "With French at the Front"
"Under French's Command"
"With Our Russian Allies"
&c.

Illustrated by Arch. Webb

BLACKIE AND SON LIMITED
LONDON GLASGOW AND BOMBAY

1916

BY LT.-COLONEL BRERETON

With the Allies to the Rhine: A Story of the Finish of the War.
With Allenby in Palestine: A Story of the latest Crusade.
Under Foch's Command: A Tale of the Americans in France.
The Armoured-Car Scouts: The Campaign in the Caucasus.
On the Road to Bagdad: A Story of the British Expeditionary Force in Mesopotamia.
From the Nile to the Tigris: Campaigning from Western Egypt to Mesopotamia.
Under Haig in Flanders: A Story of Vimy, Messines, and Ypres.
With Joffre at Verdun: A Story of the Western Front.
On the Field of Waterloo.
With Wellington in Spain: A Story of the Peninsula.
Kidnapped by Moors: A Story of Morocco.
The Hero of Panama: A Tale of the Great Canal.
The Great Aeroplane: A Thrilling Tale of Adventure.
A Hero of Sedan: A Tale of the Franco-Prussian War.
Roger the Bold: A Tale of the Conquest of Mexico.
At Grips with the Turk: A Story of the Dardanelles Campaign.
The Great Airship.
A Sturdy Young Canadian.
A Boy of the Dominion: A Tale of Canadian Immigration.
Under the Chinese Dragon: A Tale of Mongolia.
With Roberts to Candahar: Third Afghan War.
A Hero of Lucknow: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny.
Under French's Command: A Story of the Western Front from Neuve Chapelle to Loos.
With French at the Front: A Story of the Great European War down to the Battle of the Aisne.
John Bargreave's Gold: A Search for Sunken Treasure.
Tom Stapleton, the Boy Scout.
A Soldier of Japan: A Tale of the Russo-Japanese War.
A Knight of St. John: A Tale of the Siege of Malta.
Foes of the Red Cockade: The French Revolution.
One of the Fighting Scouts: Guerrilla War in South Africa.
The Dragon of Pekin: A Story of the Boxer Revolt.
A Gallant Grenadier: A Story of the Crimean War.

LONDON: BLACKIE & SON, LTD., 50 OLD BAILEY, E.C.

Contents

CHAP.

I. THE CAMP AT RUHLEBEN
II. HENRI AND JULES AND STUART
III. THE ROAD TO FREEDOM
IV. THE HEART OF GERMANY
V. ELUDING THE PURSUERS
VI. CHANGING THEIR DIRECTION
VII. A FRIEND IN NEED
VIII. THE VERDUN SALIENT
IX. A TERRIFIC BOMBARDMENT
X. THE THIN LINE OF HEROES
XI. FALLING BACK
XII. A RECONNOITRING-PARTY
XIII. DOUAUMONT FORTRESS
XIV. FRENCHMEN AND BRANDENBURGERS
XV. RATS IN A TRAP
XVI. A FIGHT TO A FINISH
XVII. CHARGE OF THE GALLANT BRETONS
XVIII. A SINISTER GERMAN
XIX. HEROIC "POILUS"

Illustrations

"THE SERGEANT OF HENRI'S PLATOON, ONE ARM DANGLING HELPLESS BY HIS
SIDE, STRETCHED OUT A BRAWNY HAND AND GRIPPED OUR HERO'S"
(missing from book) . . . . . *Frontispiece*

"A BIG BURLY MAN, A NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICER OF THE STAFF AT
RUHLEBEN, BARRED HENRI'S PROGRESS" (missing from book)

"A TERRIFIC CONCUSSION SENT HIS BOWL FLYING AND THE YOUNG SOLDIER
HIMSELF ROLLING FROM THE BANK"

"THEY SAW A GERMAN SOLDIER ACTUALLY DRINKING FROM THE STREAM
WITHIN A FEW YARDS OF THEM

"THAT BEARDED VETERAN, LEANING OVER THE SWAYING WALL, MADE HAVOC
AMONG THE GERMANS WITH HIS BAYONET"

"THE GRENADE LANDED WITHIN A FOOT OF THE FIRE ABOUT WHICH THE MEN
HAD BEEN SEATED"

MAP OF VERDUN SALIENT DURING OPERATIONS ON 21ST FEBRUARY, 1916

MAP OF VERDUN SALIENT AFTER FOUR MONTHS OF CONTINUOUS FIGHTING

WITH JOFFRE AT VERDUN

CHAPTER I

The Camp at Ruhleben

You'd have said, if you had glanced casually at Henri de Farquissaire, that he was British—British from the well-trimmed head of hair beneath his light-grey Homberg hat to the most elegant socks and tan shoes which adorned his feet. His walk was British, his stride the active, elastic, athletic stride of one of our young fellows; and the poise of his head, the erectness of his lithe figure, a symbol of what one is accustomed to in Britons wherever they are met. That one gathered from a mere casual glance; though a second glance—a more penetrating one, we will say, one with a trifle more curiosity thrown into it—would have discovered other points still bearing out the same assumption as to Henri's nationality, and leaving hardly a suspicion that in point of fact he was French—as French as they make them.

For, putting aside the fact that this young gentleman was dressed in clothes unmistakably British, tailored, in fact, in the heart of fashionable London, his features, as well as his figure and his method of progress, pointed to a British origin. Not, let us add, that there is need to make comparisons between the appearance of young men of France and those of our country, nor need to exploit the one against the other. That there are essential differences between the two nationalities all will admit—differences accentuated, no doubt, in the great majority of cases by dress, by manner, and by environment.

But Henri—what nationality could he have belonged to other than British—with those rosy cheeks, that fresh complexion, and that little perky moustache which adorned his upper lip? His "How do you do?" in the

purest English as he met a companion in the street was as devoid of accent as would have been that of a habitué of London. There was nothing exaggerated about his method of raising his hat to a lady whom he passed, no gesticulations, no active nervous movements of his hands, and none of that shrugging of the shoulders which, public opinion has it, is so eminently characteristic of our Gallic neighbours. And yet the young man was French.

Striding down one of Berlin's main streets in that summer of 1914, now so historic, he was chatting amiably with his chum, Jules Epain, a resident, like himself, of Berlin.

"So it's war, eh?" he asked his chum in French.

"War?"

There was silence for a little while, and then from Jules: "And we are here, in Berlin, the Kaiser's city!"

"Just so!" from Henri; "and, Jules, my boy, the sooner we take steps to move along the better. I have taken tickets for England already, and don't forget we are English."

There again, without a doubt, the appearance of Henri's friend would assist the suggestion which he had just mentioned. English? Yes, if Henri looked a British subject, and indeed spoke and behaved essentially as one of our people, then Jules, too, was not behind him. Perhaps more elegant, of darker features, spruce, neat, and well-groomed like his chum, he too had the distinguished air, that quiet and unassuming demeanour which stamp the Englishman throughout the world.

"You've the tickets, eh?" he asked Henri as they strode along. "For England too?"

"For England. And a tremendous job it was to get them. You see, Germany has declared war on France and Russia, and to attempt to return to France would have been out of the question. It had to be England, or Holland, or some such place, and England's quite good enough for me if I can get there."

"Bah!" Someone exploded near them; a huge, stout, helmeted individual gave vent to an exclamation of disgust, anger, hatred. The man spluttered as he suddenly pounced upon the two and ordered them to halt abruptly.

"So, French canaille!"

This huge Berlin constable positively foamed as he looked down upon the two young fellows, positively gnashed his teeth as he clenched his fists and regarded them angrily. In his super-arrogance this huge bully towered over the couple, and treated them to a stare, a derisive, angry, contemptuous inspection, which humbled them exceedingly. Indeed, Henri and Jules might have been simply noxious animals, mere beetles to be trodden underfoot, so contemptuous was this bullying constable of them.

"Bah! So, French at large, and not yet imprisoned! You are arrested."

"But arrested? But we're not soldiers," Henri told him in the best of German; "and in any case you will allow us to go to our lodging and get our baggage?"

Allow them to go to their lodgings! Permit any sort of privilege! Did any German since the commencement of this war allow any sort of a kindly sentiment to guide his actions when dealing with so-called enemies? The constable exploded, and, opening his heavily moustached mouth, roared an order at them.

"You will come with me at once! Hi, you! My Fritz! You will assist me, lest these men make an attack upon my person."

He called to his help a constable even bigger than himself, stouter by far, a man who looked as though he had lived on the fat of the earth, and had derived intense enjoyment from it. One would have imagined from his proportions, from the beefiness of his face, from his girth, that this second individual might have proved—as is the case with so many men of size—of a genial and gentle disposition. Yet Henri and Jules knew well enough that no such thing was to be expected; indeed, to speak only the truth, the people of Berlin knew this Fritz as a sardonic, brutal, overbearing individual. He

bore down upon the trio like a huge, overgrown bull, and, making no bones of the matter, seized Henri in a grip from which there was no escaping.

"Get on with you to the station. A spy, eh?" he asked the cheerful constable who had called for his assistance.

"Who knows?" the man grunted. "But it's more than likely, for all Frenchmen in these parts are spies. Drag him along, while I see to this other whipper-snapper."

They were followed by a growing crowd of citizens of Berlin, a curious crowd which ran beside the two mountains of the law, so as to get a clear view of the prisoners, a crowd composed of elderly, white-bearded gentlemen, of middle-aged ladies of almost aristocratic appearance, and of youths and young girls, and gutter urchins—people who, you would have thought, once they had obtained a view of the captives and ascertained the reason for their arrest, would have been satisfied to leave the matter and to go on their way forgetting the subject. Perhaps in other days that crowd might have so behaved itself, and might have vanished long before the constables and their captives had reached the station; but crowds in the city of Berlin of other days, and the mob as it was in the latter part of July and the early days of August of 1914, were essentially and unmistakably different. War had been declared by the Fatherland, that war expected by the nation, eagerly awaited by all Teutons, longed for, oh how much and how eagerly, by all the subjects of the Kaiser! And now that it had come, now that the Emperor had thrown down the gauntlet before France and Russia, you would have imagined that the people of Berlin would have been overjoyed, would have been delighted, too happy and too contented to be angry. And yet, it so happened that there was disappointment, anger, rage, in the hearts of almost all these Germans. True, they had obtained, after all those years of training, a declaration for which they had so eagerly waited. France was in their power, conquered already, they told themselves, for was she not utterly unprepared for war? And as for Russia, Russia the Colossus, the steam-roller, inefficiency reigned in her ranks, and she, too, in her turn, would be most unquestionably conquered.

Then what, what had occurred to make this Berlin crowd—the swarm of people who hurried along the streets elsewhere, the mobs which gathered in

front of embassies—so violent, so intensely hostile to France, so suspicious of the presence of spies, so furiously disappointed and angry?

"Spies! British spies!" a young man in the ranks of that crowd bellowed, catching a full view of Jules and Henri; "spies from the King of England! Kill them!"

And the mob took up the shout: "British! Down with Britain!"

Was that then the explanation of the hatred, of the intense animosity, shown by these people? Was that then the reason why these two Berlin constables, for one of them at least knew Jules and Henri to be French—why they too should grit their teeth, should scowl and mutter at the name of Britain? Yes, indeed, that was the reason why all the subjects of the Kaiser, deliriously happy but a few hours ago, were now snarling with anger, less contented with what was occurring, furiously indignant at something beyond their conception. For within half an hour of Henri's successful purchase of tickets, which were to take himself and his chum to safety in England, there had come news of importance from London. Already German troops had invaded Belgium, had fired upon the people, were engaged with King Albert's soldiers, and Britain—that arrogant Britain, ever an eyesore and a thorn in the flesh for Germans—had protested, had declared her detestation of that Germanic act, and her decision to oppose it. Indeed, she had answered the deeds of the Kaiser and his soldiers by declaring war, by announcing her determination to fight the Germans, and her decision to support France and Belgium and Russia to her utmost.

That, then, was the reason why that mob, gathering weight at every moment, howled with rage when, seeing Jules and Henri so distinctly British in appearance, they recalled to their minds the engrossing fact that all Britons were now their enemies.

"Hang them to the nearest lamp-post! Strangle the spies!" they bellowed; "why take them to the police station?"

In his excessive zeal to deal a blow for his country, with an extremity of valour which he would hardly have displayed had Jules and Henri been free to defend themselves, one youth, possessed of coal-black, flashing eyes, of

raven locks, and of pallid and bloated features, darted in between the two constables and struck a blow at Jules which, if it had taken effect, would most decidedly have damaged his personal appearance.

"Himmel! But not that!" shouted the stoutest of the constables. "What! You would strike and damage a prisoner of ours who may be valuable to the authorities! You would!"

In a moment he had gripped the scabbard of his sword, and, swinging it round, dealt this malefactor a blow across the head which stretched him on the pavement. Then, jostling their prisoners between them, hurrying them on, and smiling triumphantly at the crowd still massed around them, encouraging them almost to repeat the attempt of that young fellow so drastically punished, and so to torture their prisoners, and yet keeping the most valiant of these angry individuals at arm's length, the two men of law dragged Jules and Henri swiftly onwards.

And at last the doors of the police station closed behind them, leaving outside a great mass of men and women, of gutter-snipes, and of every sort and class of individual—a mob which howled like hungry wolves as the prisoners were lost to sight to them.

Inside that station Jules and Henri at once underwent a most thorough and rigorous search.

"Ha! Tickets for England! Then you were bound for that country? And letters from France, from Paris—suspicious!"

It was useless to point out to these police officials that it was natural enough for two Frenchmen caught in Berlin at a time of declaration of war between Germany and their own people to attempt to reach some other place; and hopeless to draw their attention to the fact that, being French, letters from France in their possession were to be expected, while the contents alone could prove whether Jules and Henri were of necessity suspects.

We need hardly follow the course of events after the capture of these two unfortunate, if lively, young fellows. They were clapped into prison as a

natural course, into a dark, noisome cell, which would have been but indifferent accommodation for some malefactor. They were half-starved, bullied, browbeaten, and even beaten by their jailers, they were threatened with death as spies—though there was not an atom of evidence against them—and, finally, after many months of anguish, of short commons, of brutal treatment, they found themselves interned in Ruhleben race-course, to which so many unfortunate civilians were sent, there to mope and fret and rot while the war was in progress.

"And here we'll stay, I suppose," grumbled Henri, when some weeks had passed, and they had, as it were, settled down to the routine of camp life in Ruhleben, and had become inured—as far as young men of active dispositions and healthy appetites can become inured, to the scantily short rations with which the Germans supplied them. "It's awfully hard luck to be prisoners in a place like this when our people are fighting."

"Awfully hard," Jules echoed despondently, for he was not gifted with quite the allowance of high spirits possessed of Henri.

"But it needn't necessarily last for ever, this imprisonment," his friend told him; and perhaps he had said the same a hundred times already. "Little news comes to us in this hole, but yet tales have reached us of men who have escaped, who have got out of Germany and have joined their French regiments."

Yes, there had been news of such escapes, and no doubt there would be others; and perhaps even Henri and Jules might themselves contrive to get out of their predicament. Yet, how? Look round the camp and see those rolls of barbed wire which encircled them, see the armed sentries who moved along their beats, and the jailers and men appointed to watch and spy amongst the prisoners, who strode here and there, hectoring the weak, browbeating the strong, and fawning, perhaps, upon those fortunate enough to be possessed of a store of money. Bitterly did the two young fellows regret the chances which had brought them to Berlin, and had found them there at the outbreak of war; for, indeed, it was but a chance which had taken them to the Kaiser's city.

Let us explain how it happened that these two young men were of such distinctly British appearance. After all, there was nothing extraordinary about that fact, nothing particularly unusual, for in Paris, for years past, there has been a sufficiency of British tailors to turn out every young man after the latest British fashion. But it was more than clothes in the case of these two young men, more than mere dress, that made them so conspicuously British; it was environment, in fact, training and education; it was the result of the intuition of their parents.

"France is all right, my boy," Monsieur de Farquissaire had told Henri when he was quite a lad, "France is a splendid country, and, if you are but like your fellows when you reach man's age, neither you nor I will have anything to complain of. But there is good in other nationalities, and there is great advantage to one among our people who both speaks the language, say, of England, and, better even than that, understands her people and has inside knowledge of them. So you will go to an English university once you have left your school in Paris."

As a matter of strict fact, Henri had left his school in Paris when only fifteen years of age, and had crossed the Channel to become one of the inmates of a public school famous throughout Great Britain. It was there that he had learned to speak like a native, and, better still, it was there that he had learned, unconsciously, quite easily in fact, to behave just as did his fellows, to speak as they did, quietly, without undue or exaggerated action, to play their games, to understand and practise their codes of honour; and so faithful and diligent a student was he, so heartily did he enter into the work and games of that public school, that, when in due course he went to a university, he was mistaken, just as he had been at the moment of the opening of this story, for a British subject, an essentially insular individual.

As for Jules, when one has described the appearance and the life-history, though only a short one so far, of the energetic Henri, one has practically described that of his companion. For Jules and Henri were born next-door to one another, were chums from their earliest boyhood, and, thanks to the intimate friendship of their parents, had the same course marked out for them. Jules, then, followed Henri to that public school in England, followed him to the university, was like him in his fancy for British ways and British

customs, and followed him yet again, indeed went in his company, on that journey to Berlin which immersed them in this misfortune.

And there they were, interned in Ruhleben, impounded, corralled if you like, separated from their countrymen by ghastly fences of barbed wire, and by a nation composed of men and women who, almost without exception, would, if they were to discover them outside their prison, most eagerly tear them to pieces.

"But it's got to be done!" Jules said, as he and Henri sat outside the stable, the wooden hovel, indeed, in which they lived, in which they bedded down at night in stalls once occupied by horses, and now merely strewed with straw, cruelly cold and unfit for human habitation.

"And the sooner we set about it the better. We'll have to harden our hearts," said Henri, looking very determined and attempting to twist the ends of his miniature moustache; "we'll have to save our food for the journey."

Jules shivered. He wasn't a greedy young man, nor could his appetite be described as unusually large, but he was hungry. Hungry then, at the moment when Henri spoke of saving rations, hungry at night, hungry when he had had his food, hungry always. He was like every member of the unfortunate crowd now inhabiting the race-course at Ruhleben, he was short of food—for the Germans were the harshest of captors. And how could a man save sufficient from a mere crust of bread? How could he put away from rations, already and for so long insufficient, even a crumb *per diem* to carry him on during some coming journey?

"Yes, it's got to be done," said Henri, with determination; "and, what's more, we shall have to save money. We are getting a little already: I had a few marks sent through from Paris only last week, while we have both got a few notes tucked away in our clothing. But it's not money, however, which will help us; not even food. It will be our wits, which will have to be brisk, I can tell you."

Looking about them as they sat near their hovel, both knew that the words were abundantly true, for where was there a loophole in those

barbed-wire fences? Where was there an opportunity to break out of this prison? Yet the chance came, came unexpectedly, came after some weeks of waiting and despondency, came at a moment, in fact, when it found Jules and Henri almost unready, unprepared to seize a golden opportunity.

CHAPTER II

Henri and Jules and Stuart

There was a hue and cry in the camp of Ruhleben which caused heads to be thrust out of doors and out of windows, made prisoners who had been languishing in the place for months start to their feet and look enquiringly about them, and set a German official turning round and round like a teetotum—his moustaches bristling, his hair on end, amazed at the din and fearful for the cause of it. It all commenced with a sudden shout, and then was emphasized by the explosion of a rifle. A dull thud followed as a bullet struck one of the huts and perforated it, and then a dozen weapons went off, the somewhat aged guardians of the camp losing their heads and blazing away without aim and without authority.

"What's up? What's happened? Why is there firing?"

"Shooting a prisoner, eh? Brutes—they'd do anything! Mon Dieu! What will happen next?"

The first speaker was a delicate, pale-faced, spectacled Breton; the second, a vivacious individual from Paris, who, like Henri and Jules, had had the misfortune to be in Germany when the war broke out. Their eager questions were followed by the somewhat phlegmatic and casual words of an Englishman—a red-headed, red-cheeked, healthy-looking individual, who, in spite of short commons, still looked bulky.

"Someone's lost his head," he said caustically, with a growl, sitting up and looking about him. "I'll get the reason in two guesses: someone's trying to escape, or someone has escaped."

Something very dreadful might really have happened, judging by the commotion in the camp, by the shouts of the sentries, and by the firing. The Governor himself—living aloof from the individuals interned in the place and under his administration—heard the racket and came out, buttoning up his tunic, alarmed, his thoughts in a whirl, eager to discover what had given rise to the commotion; and Henri and Jules, like the rest of their companions, were, as one may imagine, just as curious and just as eager.

"Whatever the ruction is, whatever the cause, the point where it commenced is over there, behind those huts in the far corner," said the former, watching the German guards race across the place and listening to their shouts and to the loud commands of the non-commissioned officers amongst them. "Let's saunter in that direction. Come along."

And saunter they did, being joined in a little while by a number of people interned in the camp; and amongst them by the red-headed, red-cheeked, and healthy-looking individual who boasted, somewhat loudly it is to be feared at times, of his English nationality. Not that such boastings disgusted the unhappy people interned at Ruhleben, for it did them good in those days of depression to hear a man—a robust man such as this individual—proud of his birth, and still possessed of sufficient spirit to glory in it, to draw comparisons between himself, his French, his Belgian, and his Japanese fellow-prisoners, and Germans in general, The man's swagger, in fact, delighted them, and helped to bolster up the fading spirits of many an unfortunate captive in the camp—of many a man, who, but for the jibes and uncomplimentary remarks of this robust prisoner, would long since have given up hope and have subsided into melancholy.

"What a row!" he scoffed, as side by side with Jules and Henri he sauntered across the compound. "No, don't you hurry, you fellows, for there's never any knowing what will happen in these days. Those German guards have lost their heads, and the chances are that, if in your curiosity you happen to step along too quickly or to run, they'd imagine that a mutiny had broken out, and would blaze away at you. Lor' what a commotion!"

By now some twenty of the German guards—those Landsturm men of perhaps fifty years of age—had collected in the opposite corner, at the point where the alarm had first been given, and could be seen, grouped together, gesticulating, shouting at one another, peering into the corner of the compound, and carrying on in a manner which accentuated, if anything, the curiosity of the prisoners.

"One could imagine anything," laughed Henri as they got nearer. "For instance, you could imagine that one of the fellows interned here, goaded to rashness by these bullies who look after us, had struck one of them."

"Yes, that's not at all unlikely. Goaded to madness, one of the poor chaps may have put his fist into the face of a German guard, and that shot would have been the result; of course, the poor beggar would be killed instantly, for your German is nothing if not ruthless. He's armed, you see, and is the stronger party, and knows that the authorities won't look too harshly on any drastic action."

"Hold on! Perhaps it's not a case of an assault on one of the guards," chimed in the healthy Englishman, Stuart by name. "I've said already that I'd guess the reason in two guesses—someone trying to escape, or someone already escaped—and I stick to that opinion. Let's hope it's someone escaped—lucky beggar! Here have I been kicking my heels about this infernal camp for months past, looking round for a chance to get out, ready to 'do in' a German guard if the opportunity came. But, bless you, there's never been the remotest chance, for these Germans keep their eyes so precious wide open. As for 'doing in' a guard, why, I'd do in half a dozen; for, believe me, it'd want a good half-dozen Germans to stop me, once I saw the hole open through which I could get out."

It wasn't altogether undiluted brag on the part of this sturdy fellow—mere boasting of what he would do under particular conditions which were never likely to arise. A glance at him, indeed, rather helped to support his statements, for Stuart, though somewhat attenuated after those months of internment at Ruhleben, after months of short commons and indifferent accommodation, was still a big bony fellow of some twenty-five years of age, with broad shoulders, long arms and legs, and a chest which would have fitted a Hercules. True, there were hollows in his cheeks, and his eyes

were gaunt and sunken, yet what man in that camp of suffering, what man amongst all the unfortunate fellows caught in Germany at the outbreak of war and hustled to Ruhleben, did not, long since, show signs of suffering and anxiety and of want, often of destitution. As a matter of fact, the robust Stuart had stood the privations of the place better than the majority of his fellows; and perhaps his very jauntiness of spirit, the courage which sustained him and helped also to sustain his comrades, kept him from feeling his position so acutely, and helped also to assist him in surviving a state of affairs which to some had long since become intolerable, which indeed was killing not a few by inches.

By now the trio had crossed the compound, and were within a few feet of their guards, who, absorbed in whatever had caused the alarm and had sent them rushing to that corner, seemed to overlook the prisoners—all the men about them—seemed to be unaware of the crowd collecting in that quarter. They were gathered in the far corner, just outside one of the many huts erected there—a sorry affair, which at one time had done duty on the race-course as a tool-shed. In those days it would not have been considered good enough even for the dogs of the owners of German race-horses; but now, yes, it was good enough—too good—for these enemy prisoners, for these individuals snatched from amongst the civil population of Germany. Young men, some of them, hale men in those days before the war; elderly men, invalids from some of Germany's health resorts—harmless individuals in numerous cases, who, had they been Germans and in England, would have been left alone, able to live their lives in peace and security, provided they obeyed certain rules and regulations of a not too drastic nature; but in Germany German "frightfulness" allowed of no leniency even to sick men. And here they were, the hale, the young, the sick, and the old, hustled to Ruhleben, and herded there together in such an old shed as the one in this far corner. Many men brought up in luxury in France or in England, needing care and comfort because of the state of their health, and undoubtedly quite harmless individuals, were forced to find such accommodation during those dreary months of later 1914 and the months which followed as this World War went on.

It happened, too, that amongst the people interned at this place were a number of jockeys and racing people, employed up to the date of the war by

German masters, and detained in the country. These—perhaps a dozen of them—had been posted to the very hut round which the German guards were then standing, and, as Henri and Jules came upon the scene, could be observed within the ring of guards, cowering, looking askance at the Germans, and evidently in sore trouble.

"One of our jockey friends then is the culprit," said Jules; "it's one of the racing-men who has been goaded to madness."

"And has been shot by a German guard?" asked Henri.

"Not a bit of it, not a bit of it!" exclaimed Stuart; "there has been no shooting here. Just listen to the questions being asked. I know German sufficiently to be able to tell what's passing, and those German guards are asking how the work commenced, who thought of the idea, and who was the ring-leader? If that isn't connected with an attempt at escape, call me a Dutchman. No, no; don't call me a German," he said *sotto voce* in Henri's ear, grimacing as he did so; "don't call me that, my boy, or you will be in trouble."

Certainly the German guards were asking many questions; they were firing them off by the hundred almost, they were shouting them at their prisoners and at one another, till there was such a babel that no one could answer and few could understand. It was not, indeed, until a non-commissioned officer of burly form and bullying appearance came upon the scene that the commotion ended, and some sort of order was introduced.

"Stop this brawling," he bellowed, thrusting his way in amongst the guards and pushing them unceremoniously to either side. "What's this racket? Who fired the shot? Quick, answer!"

A somewhat startled-looking individual, a man with grey beard and rotund body, who before the onset of the war may have anticipated well enough that he would never again be called to the colours, advanced somewhat timidly from behind his comrades and drew himself up stiffly at attention. Yet not stiffly enough, not with that snap which is characteristic of the younger German. The non-commissioned officer coughed and

snorted, and looked the man over with a threatening eye which set the fellow trembling.

"Ha! Ho! It is you, eh? You fired the shot—you?" and there was a note of contempt in his voice. "Then why? On whose orders? Here are the orders of the day as to the duties of a sentry, and as to the occasions on which he shall use a rifle. Listen, I will read them."

It was a sample of German militarism which the Sergeant was reproducing to the full, a sample of the preciseness of the Teuton. Keeping this elderly guard at attention till the poor fellow looked as though he would explode, he groped in the pocket in the tail of his tunic, and, producing a notebook, proceeded to extricate from it a sheet of paper on which were some typewritten lines; and then in a ponderous and somewhat menacing voice he read the orders—orders which set forth exactly and minutely when a guard should come on duty and when he should be relieved, what reports he should prepare, and what he was to observe amongst the prisoners. Finally, having elaborated a number of minor points, it set forth the orders as to using firearms.

"And shall not fire upon the prisoners unless there be occasion," coughed the Sergeant; "that is to say, unless there is insubordination amongst them, mutiny, a threat to strike, or an endeavour to escape. That is the gist of the orders. Now, my friend, you have either obeyed or you have disobeyed your orders. Your report! You fired a shot. Why? Under what heading?"

No wonder the unfortunate and rotund guard who had set the camp in an uproar flushed till he became quite scarlet, till his face swelled to the point of bursting, and until his eyes looked as though they would fall out of his astonished head. He stuttered and coughed, and stood at ease, for the effort to remain at attention was beyond him.

"Halt! Stand to attention!" thundered the non-commissioned officer. "Now, your report. There was incipient mutiny amongst the prisoners, eh?"

The guard shook his head and spluttered; even now he was unable to command so much as a single word.

"No! Then there was insubordination amongst a number, or in the case of a single individual, eh?"

"Not so," the guard managed to stutter; "not so, Sergeant."

"Ah! Then we get nearer to it. A man struck you, or threatened to do so?"

"No, it was not that," the German standing to attention managed to answer; "not that, Sergeant."

"What, then? Then it was someone attempting an escape? Someone trying to break out of Ruhleben!" shouted the Sergeant—bellowed it, in fact—when he saw that the guard was nodding his head emphatically. "You mean to tell me that you have stood there all these minutes, and allowed me to read the orders of the day, and to cross-examine you, without giving so much as a hint as to the real cause of the firing of your rifle? You mean to say that you have allowed all this delay, well knowing that a prisoner is attempting or had made an escape, and thereby have assisted him to make clean away from this prison?"

It was the non-commissioned officer's turn almost to explode with indignation and anger; he towered above the trembling guard as he thundered at him, and might still have been abusing him and threatening him had it not been that at that moment another individual came upon the scene—a short, spare, dried-up fellow, a lieutenant, one risen from the ranks not long ago, and still retaining all the bullying ways of a non-commissioned officer. If the burly sergeant had jostled the guards unceremoniously to either side, had stamped on their feet, had threatened and browbeaten them, the new-comer was tenfold more violent and domineering. If looks could have slaughtered individuals, the glance he cast at the sergeant would have slain that perspiring and angry person in an instant, while the scathing glances cast at the group of guards would have decimated the whole party. Yet, if this under-officer's looks were terrible, if he were still more threatening than the non-commissioned officer, he was at least practical, and quick to get to the bottom of matters.

"Stop this racket!" he commanded abruptly, snapping the words like pistol-shots at those round him. "There was an alarm; it started with a rifle-

shot—I know all that, so you needn't report it. Stop!" he commanded, seeing the non-commissioned officer open his mouth as if to describe what had happened. "A rifle-shot gave the alarm—something caused one of the guards to fire. This man here undoubtedly is the man who did so. Sergeant, you have called for his report? You have been here a good five minutes—what's the report?"

"A prisoner escaping. This fool here has kept the knowledge from me until this very moment, and I have only just managed to drag the information from him. I have——"

"Hold!" snapped the officer. "I am not asking what you did; I am asking what caused the sentry to fire. A prisoner escaping, you tell me—he's gone then; you've ascertained that fact?"

"I—I—he—you——"

The non-commissioned officer was utterly taken aback, and it was his turn now to look askance at this dried-up, sinister-looking under-officer. If the unfortunate and aged guard who had fired that shot had been remiss in making a rapid report—remissness excusable enough considering the violence of the Sergeant—the latter had been more remiss in not pursuing the matter more rapidly. He knew it, and knew that the under-officer already condemned him. Moreover, with that under-officer, he was well aware, excuses would not avail him.

"I was going to——"

"That will do," the officer told him. "Whatever you were going to do was not your duty. You have been delaying a report; I will deal with you later in the Commandant's office. Now, my friend," he began, turning upon the trembling guard, "a prisoner was escaping; I will ask the question that should have been asked at the very commencement: you fired a shot—you killed the man, eh?—so that he did not escape, or you stopped him?"

There was the dawn of a smile actually on the face of the rotund guard who had been so odiously browbeaten by the Sergeant. It was his turn, he felt, his turn to be jubilant, and at the expense of the man who had bullied

him so abominably. He was, in fact, helping to turn the tables on the Sergeant, and hastened to assist the officer.

"I was about to report the matter, sir," he said. "A prisoner was escaping, but failed. I did not shoot him, because it was not possible, seeing that he was out of sight and underground. I therefore fired my rifle to give an alarm and to call assistance. Meanwhile I stood guard over the opening, which I discovered by mere accident. In the hut, there, sir, there is a hole beneath the boards laid on the floor, and a tunnel leading from it. It is not my duty to enter the huts, and, in fact, the orders of sentries are emphatic on that point; we are to patrol outside though, and not to venture farther unless there is a commotion. But it is the duty of the non-commissioned officer in whose charge a hut may be to see that the prisoners keep the place tidy, to watch them carefully, and to observe if they show signs of an attempted escape."

"Hah!" The fierce little dried-up under-officer actually smiled—smiled at this stout sentry, smiled at him, and, indeed, almost winked. For, in an instant, he had realized what was happening, how by this last statement the guard was implicating the Sergeant, who had been so recently upbraiding him. To speak the truth, he was no lover of the non-commissioned officer either; and in days gone by—not so very long ago either—when he, too, had been of the non-commissioned officers' ranks, and had enjoyed but little seniority over the Sergeant, he had had occasion to complain of his bullying, of his arrogance, and of his unpleasant gibes and innuendoes. It was an opportunity then to be snatched at, both for the sake of himself and of this somewhat ancient sentry, who, whatever he might be, however stupid, was essentially harmless.

"So," he began, "that is as you say, my friend; it is not your duty to enter any of the enclosures, but to march to and fro and to keep an eye on the prisoners. It is for the sergeant in charge of each of the huts to carry out his duties, and to detect any and every effort to escape. Then who is the sergeant in charge of this place outside which we are standing?"

There was silence amongst the group, a deathly silence, during which the aged Landsturm sentry pulled himself up stiffly at attention, or into the nearest approach to that position to which he could attain, and smiled covertly in the direction of the sergeant who had browbeaten him. Others of

those somewhat senile guards, who at the sound of their officer's voice had assumed that position of respect demanded of all German soldiers, also cast swift glances in the same direction, and even went so far—seeing that the snappy little officer's back was turned and his attention otherwise engaged—as to grin quite openly, and smirk, as they watched the flaming face of the Sergeant. As for the latter, perspiration was pouring from beneath his helmet, the man's hands were twitching, while his eyes were rolling in the most horrible manner. He was cornered, he knew, and guessed thoroughly that the opportunity thus discovered, thanks to the sentry and to his own bullying manner, would be taken advantage of.

"Who, then, is the sergeant responsible?" asked the officer in cold, unsympathetic tones, looking the unfortunate sergeant over from the spike of his *Pickelhaube* to the thick soles of his regulation boots. "Surely not this sergeant? Surely not the non-commissioned officer before me—the one so quick to find fault with a sentry who seems to have been doing only his duty? Surely not!"

And yet a glance at his face showed well enough that he knew that the culprit stood before him; moreover, that he was determined to make the most of the opportunity.

"I—we—this fool here——" began the Sergeant, spluttering, confused, and now just as thoroughly frightened as had been the victim he had pounced upon such a little time before.

"Stop!" snapped the officer; "you are under arrest; go back to your quarters. Now, my man, you fired your rifle to stop a man from escaping. Narrate the circumstances, and quickly, for, for all I know, the rascal may be even now continuing the attempt."

At that the sentry smiled—smiled boldly too, when he saw the discomfiture of the Sergeant. Turning half-right abruptly, till he faced the entrance of the hut, he pointed towards it, and shook his grizzly head knowingly.

"It was like this, sir," he said, with an air of triumph, "I was passing to and fro on my beat, noting nothing out of the ordinary, until there came a

moment when I was opposite this hut, almost on the precise spot on which I am now standing, when I heard sounds which attracted my notice—heavy sounds, the noise of men digging. There was no sergeant in sight, no one responsible for the hut to whom I could appeal, yet a glance within showed me an opening in the floor, covered as a rule by boards, which were now removed. There was a man in the hole, deep down and beyond it, in a tunnel, a man whose figure I could only just discern—a ruffian who was attempting to dig his way from the hut out beyond the wire entanglements. It was then, seeing there was no one here to support me, that I fired my rifle."

"Ha! And the fellow is there still?" demanded the officer quickly.

"Still, your honour, unless he has escaped during the time the Sergeant cross-questioned me; of a truth, he is still there, unless, perhaps, he should have in the meantime, while I was delayed in executing my duty, contrived to clamber out of the opening."

"Close in, you men," bellowed the officer; "half a dozen of you come along with me, and hold your rifles ready. Now, into the hut and let us capture these fellows."

Closing round the entrance to the hovel—termed a hut—in which the unfortunate interned aliens had been forced to live for months, the sentries watched the officer and a few of their comrades push their way into the interior, heard them stamping on the boards, and listened to the peremptory orders of the former.

"Come out, you ruffian, or ruffians," he bellowed. "We have you securely, and any further attempt at escape will be met with instant execution. Ah! I can see a man down below. Go in, two of you men, and haul him up to the surface."

With no great show of enthusiasm, stiffly, and with a lack of energy and that activity to be expected of younger men, two of the guards at once lowered themselves into the pit dug beneath the boards which did duty as a flooring to this hovel, and, disappearing from sight in the tunnel excavated from the bottom of it, were presently heard giving expression to gruff

commands, while the sound of scuffling followed. Then they reappeared, dragging a couple of dishevelled and exceedingly dirty prisoners with them. Others of the guards then stepped forward, and in a trice the wretched men who had been detected in the act of escaping were dragged from the hole, were placed between sentries, and were marched out of the hut.

Meanwhile, as may be imagined, the excitement in the camp had not tended to decrease, for curiosity had been added to it. There was a throng of prisoners round the hut long since, watching at first the altercation between the Sergeant and the sentry, and then observing and listening to all that followed.

"A pretty kettle of fish—eh?" sneered Stuart, the healthy Britisher. "Sorry for those poor beggars; for their rations have been short enough already, and now, if they are not shot, they will get close confinement and bread and water only for a couple of weeks or more. Bad luck! Horribly bad luck! Just at the last, too, for it looks as though they were well on the way to safety."

"Now, report," suddenly came the voice of the little officer, as he glowered upon the prisoners. "You two who went into the tunnel report on its length, its depth. Bah! You didn't look! You didn't ascertain that! Wait while I investigate the matter."

Seizing an electric torch from one of the hapless prisoners, the officer dropped into the pit immediately and was gone for some few minutes, only to emerge again, dirty like the prisoners, but triumphant instead of crestfallen, his face beaming, his eyes sparkling with happiness. So pleased was he that he even went to the length of patting that stout, rotund sentry on the shoulder as soon as he had emerged into the open.

"A fine catch," he told him, "bravely done, my friend! See, you detected them just at the very right moment, for the dusk is already growing, and in five minutes or less they would have been in the open. Let me tell you, that tunnel was not prepared in a day or two, or even in a week, I am certain. It is the work of days and days, grim, hard work, and has been carried right up beyond the hut and under the wire entanglements. There it stops, though already it was rising to the surface, and to-morrow morning, when we

investigate the place, I feel sure that a thrust with a bar will break a way into the open. March the prisoners across to the guard-room; and you, my friend, come along and make your report to the Commandant. Ha! What are all these rascals doing here? Curious, eh? Get back to your stables!"

There was an instant move on the part of the prisoners interned in the camp, who had collected in this corner to see what was passing. Turning about promptly—for to disobey an order when under the thumb of Germans was to court a shot from a rifle—they went off briskly in the dusk to their own particular huts, while behind them was heard the sharp command of the sergeant in charge of the sentries, the tramp of heavy feet, and the passage of the sentries and prisoners in the direction of the guard-room.

"Come along," said Stuart, his hands deep in his pockets, his head held forward, his chin on his breast. "I'm frightfully sorry for those poor fellows. Just fancy! To be within, say, a foot of freedom and then to fall, and then to be detected by the merest mischance."

"Within a foot of freedom! That's what that officer said," Henri was muttering to himself. "Just a foot, just a thrust of an iron bar, and then to safety, freedom—freedom from this prison. Why not!"

"Why not?" he asked suddenly, clutching Jules's coat.

"What? Why not?" the latter asked. "Don't understand."

"Why not complete the work? Those fellows have done precisely what we should have done—they've dug a hole and have run a tunnel from the bottom of it out below the open and below the entanglements. It's there—ready for anyone who wants to get out of this place. Anyone, Jules! Don't you understand?"

Stuart grabbed at Henri, and thrust his big, healthy face close up to his. He was breathing deeply, in heavy gusts, and, but for the gathering darkness, it would have been seen that his eyes were shining, while he showed every sign of excitement.

"Why not? You fellows were thinking of making an escape?" he asked.

"Certainly," Henri told him; "we've been saving our grub, and what money we could get. We were ready but for the method, and now it's there—there in that hut—quite close to us, and it's dark enough, and—and—and there's no one about—why not?"

"Come on," said Stuart abruptly, in that resolute way he had. "I'm with you fellows, if you'll have me."

Without another word the trio turned promptly, and, looking round to make sure that no one had observed them, they bolted back to the hut from which those unfortunate prisoners had been dragged, and, closing the door behind them, leapt into the pit and made their way into the tunnel. Freedom lay before them—freedom for which they pined—freedom to be had if only they could break their way into the open.

CHAPTER III

The Road to Freedom

"What's this? An old shovel, by the feel of it—the thing they've dug the tunnel with," Henri told his comrades as they stood at the entrance of the tunnel in the dense darkness, and felt all about them. "My fingers dropped upon it as I bent at the entrance, and, yes—here's a basket with a rope attached to it, into which, no doubt, one of them shovelled the earth at the far end of the tunnel, while his comrade dragged it to the bottom of the pit by means of the rope. Poor chaps! How hard they must have worked, and what a disappointment it must have been to have failed just at the last moment."

"That's just what we have got to look to," Stuart told them in a hoarse whisper. "They've done the work and have failed; let's look to it that we get out promptly. Come along now. Give me the spade, Henri, for I'm bigger and stronger than you, and, if there's only a foot of earth above our heads

when we get to the far end of the tunnel, I'll bash a way through it without difficulty. George! What a narrow space it is! It hardly lets my shoulders through."

That tunnel, indeed, was hardly better than a rabbit burrow. Perhaps four to five feet in height, it was scarcely two in breadth, cold and dark and winding. Let us admit at once that it required no small stock of courage on the part of Stuart and his friends to force their way along it, particularly so in the case of the Englishman, whose frame was such a close fit to the damp earthen sides, that failure to break a way out at the far end would have left him in a difficult position—one from which he would undoubtedly have found it hard to extricate himself. Yet there was liberty beyond, escape from this dreary Ruhleben with its monotonous routine, with its bullying Commandant and guards, with its sordid surroundings, and its sorry accommodation and short commons. Thrusting on, therefore, pushing his way along the tunnel, squeezing himself into as small a compass as possible, Stuart forced a passage deeper into it, one hand feeling his way, while the other gripped the implement which Henri had discovered. Ten yards, twenty, perhaps thirty were covered before a growl came from the leader.

"The end!" they heard him say. "I'm up against the far end of the tunnel, and that officer was quite right when he stated that it rose toward this end. Now, hold your breath for a moment and listen while I thump the roof. There—hollow—eh? Not much earth above us. Then stand back a little whilst I make a stroke for the open."

They heard the thuds as the shovel was dashed against the roof, and listened to clods of earth and debris falling. It was precisely at the fifth stroke that a grunt escaped Stuart, while an instant later Henri felt a breath of fresh air, a cold gust sweeping past him.

"The open!" he exclaimed. "Go easy, Stuart, for it might not be dark enough yet, and impatience on our part might lead to our instant discovery. Put your head up quietly as soon as you've made room."

There were more grunts in front, while from behind came a low, warning exclamation from Jules.

"S—s—sh!" he said. "I can hear someone in the hut behind us, for the sounds are travelling down the tunnel. Push on into the open as fast as you can go, while I turn back and see what's happening."

There were more sounds then, as Jules, less bulky than Stuart, yet of formidable size when it came to free movement in this narrow tunnel, contrived by some acrobatic feat to turn himself about and face the pit from which they had started this adventure. Then he crawled back towards the hut on all fours, listening to the suspicious sounds which he had heard, wondering who caused them, fearing that the German guards had come to make a nearer investigation of the pit and tunnel. Yes, it was that, without a doubt; for there came to his ears now the sound of a man's two feet alighting at the bottom of the pit, a heavy thud, and the fall of earth as it tumbled from the sides of the pit to the bottom. Then rays of light reached him as the person who had dropped into the pit switched on an electric torch and surveyed his surroundings. Once more then Jules performed that acrobatic feat, and, twisting himself round with furious energy, hastened back to warn his comrades.

"There's a fellow at the bottom of the pit already, and no doubt he'll be coming into the tunnel," he told them in a whisper. "He's got an electric torch, and that will be far worse than the light outside, for it'll show us up directly. Shove on into the open. Push your way through. Hang the sentries! We'll have to chance their seeing us."

More blows came from Stuart, lusty blows, and the sound of heavy breathing, then an exclamation, an exclamation of delight, of triumph, and later the sound of more earth falling. That fresh breath of air which had swept into the tunnel became almost keen, while intuitively, for they could not see, Henri and Jules both realized that Stuart had already clambered from the place into the open.

"Come now," they heard a voice. "Come up, quick, and lie down flat as soon as you are beside me."

Henri stumbled on till he was right at the end of the tunnel, and, standing upright, felt a hand stretched down towards him. Gripping it, digging his toes into the sides of the tunnel, and seizing the edge above with his other

hand, he was half dragged, and half forced his way upward, then, flinging himself on the ground beside Stuart, he leant over the ragged hole and helped to extricate his comrade.

They were free! They were in the open! They were beyond the wire entanglements! And Germany lay before them—Germany, an enemy country, where every man's hand, aye, and every woman's too, would be against them. Yet they were free, and what did it matter how many enemies they had to face, how many difficulties were before them? For freedom, however much it might be embarrassed, however adventurous it might become, was freedom after all—a godsend compared with the privations, the gibes, the cruel treatment they had suffered in their prison. If anyone had ever a doubt as to this, if, when this ghastly war which is now in progress is finished, a reader happen to think that there has been exaggeration in these statements, let him but look to facts, let him but consult the known history of the treatment of interned aliens and prisoners of war in the Kaiser's country. Though war itself, and this one in particular with its long and terrible tale of casualties, is a ghastly business, the deliberate ill-treatment, the calculated starvation, and the wilful abandonment to misery and death from preventable disease of prisoners of war is a still more ghastly affair—an episode frequently repeated in the case of Germany.

"Out! Hurrah! Mon Dieu! Out of that awful hole," coughed Henri, shaking the dirt out of his hair and brushing it from behind his ears. "Out, my boys! Away from those German guards, and away from that Commandant and the whole breed of 'em."

Jules giggled. He was possessed of a lighter nature altogether, was perhaps of more flippant disposition than his chum, and had less stamina about him. Not that he was lacking in courage, or in dash, or in that élan which the French generally have displayed so magnificently in this conflict, only Jules was, perhaps, just a trifle effeminate, and giggles seemed to come almost naturally from him. Now, as he lay close to the ragged edge of the opening through which he had been forcibly dragged by Stuart and Henri, and as he spluttered and blew dirt which had introduced itself into his mouth from his discoloured lips, he gave vent to a laugh, a smothered

sound of merriment, perhaps a semi-hysterical giggle, in any case to a sound which grated on the senses of the Englishman terribly.

"Burr! Stop that!" he commanded, and somehow, for some unascertained reason, Henri and Jules, who would have resented such tones from him on any other occasion, accepted them now without a murmur. "Shut up!" growled Stuart. "Hist! There's one of those beastly sentries coming near the entanglements—and what's that?"

There were other sounds than those of steps within Ruhleben camp, that odious place of misery out of which they had broken, other noises than the heavy tramp of a ponderous Landsturm guard as he strode from behind the hut till the barbed-wire entanglements stopped his progress and he rattled his bayonet upon it, sounds which came from another quarter from beneath the ground, from the tunnel in fact from which Henri and his friends had so recently emerged.

"Hist!" exclaimed Stuart in warning tones. "Keep as low and as flat as you can. Thank goodness! That sentry fellow, after making enough noise to drown the sound of our voices, has turned away without seeing us; but—but—what's that?"

Henri stretched out a hand and gripped him by the sleeve.

"Down there," he whispered, "down there in the tunnel from which we have just come, there's someone stumbling along. And cast your eye into the opening; isn't that the gleam of a torch? Isn't that light being thrown in this direction?"

It was, without the shadow of doubt. For, as all three peered over the edge of the hole they had made so rapidly, thanks to the strength of Stuart, the depths below were illuminated for just a few seconds, and then were hidden in pitch-black darkness, which within a few moments was again lit up by a brilliant beam of light coming from a distance up the tunnel—that long path which they had followed, which had fitted the burly Stuart's shoulders so narrowly, and had made turning in his case an impossibility. It acted now as a tube, and sent sounds along towards them, accentuated them, indeed, until there was no difficulty in deciding that a man was struggling

and pushing his way towards them—a man armed with an electric torch, a fellow who breathed heavily, who swore beneath his breath and then out loud, and who set masses of earth tumbling down about him.

"Better go," whispered Henri, when the cause of the sounds was quite certain, "better slip away at once before the fellow finds the opening and shouts an alarm."

"Wait!" Stuart stretched a hand out and gripped him with a grip of iron, a grip which held the vivacious Frenchman to the ground. "Not yet, for that bounder of a sentry is again coming towards us. Lie low!" he cautioned them; "lie low, or he will see us."

"But the man below with the light—he is nearer, far nearer," said Jules, who lay with his head well over the opening. "He'll be here in next to no time—then what?"

Stuart dragged himself a little closer to that opening, and, keeping one eye on the sentry, glanced down to the bottom of the tunnel.

"Leave the beggar to me," he said. "Look here, Henri, grope about for a stone—a brick—anything that's hard and will hurt, and can be thrown easily. Ah! here's one—a big 'un too; you try the same, Jules, and get ready to heave at that sentry. When I bash my fist against the fellow below, you throw your stones as hard as you can at the German inside the entanglements, and so put out his aim; not that there's much to be feared, seeing how dark it is at this moment."

Quick as thought, Henri grabbed the big stone which Stuart thrust into his hand, and, groping about, quickly secured another. Then he slowly raised himself into a kneeling position, ready to spring to his feet and carry out the duty Stuart had given him. Nor was it likely to be a very difficult matter to strike the sentry at that moment hammering again on the barbed wire which formed the fences about the camp at Ruhleben, for though without doubt Henri and his friends lay invisible, close to the ground, the burly figure of the German stood out, huge and broad and solid, silhouetted faintly in the darkness by lights flickering from the range of shelters on the far side of the camp. As for Jules, he, too, quickly secured missiles with

which to bombard the sentry, and, as if to show how ready he was for the work in hand, gave vent again to one of those subdued giggles; whereat Stuart growled—a fierce growl—and nudged him violently. Then, of a sudden, the attention of all three was fixed on the hole through which they had emerged, and upon the depths below it. The rough sides of the tunnel, the debris and earth which they themselves had dragged down to the foot of it as they cut their path upward, every stone, every clod, was visible, as the torch—now closer at hand—lit up every crevice. Then the torch itself came into view, the hand which gripped it, the sleeve about the wrist, and finally the shoulders and the head of the individual stumbling and forcing his way towards them.

"Ach, Himmel! What a find! The wretches were almost escaping. What perseverance, though; what hard work; and, yes, what hard luck to have been discovered just on the eve of breaking out of their prison!"

It was the small, snappy under-officer who had appeared on the scene outside the hut but a few minutes earlier, and who, discovering the Sergeant there browbeating the unfortunate sentry, had turned upon him like a dog, had snapped at his heels as it were, had changed the aspect of affairs entirely, and had ended in putting the non-commissioned officer under arrest, and in himself capturing those unlucky prisoners who were hiding in the tunnel.

Doubtless it was a brilliant evening's work for him—work which might even bring him reward—who knows?—might even, in the end, bring him that Iron Cross which the Kaiser has been so fond of distributing. Men in the ranks of the German army had received that reward for lesser acts than that of the under-officer this evening; there are heroes in the armies of the All-Highest Kaiser who have been decorated with that Iron Cross for valour, and others who wear the emblem for deeds which make the rest of civilization shudder. Yes, indeed, the under-officer might well earn such reward, for he had shown acuteness, promptitude, and dispatch in carrying out his duties.

"But what's this?" Henri and Stuart and Jules heard him say, a second later, as his other hand came into view, groping along the floor of the tunnel and plunging deep into the loose soil so recently pulled from the roof

above. "The tunnel ends abruptly, and above—what's this?—above, the ruffians were making a hole. But this is strange, for when I entered before there was no sign of such a thing. The tunnel ended just here, as it does now, and the earth at its foot was hard and beaten, while above it was hard as well, but shook and gave out a hollow sound. What's this? Ah! A hole."

It was with amazement that his eyes fell upon the ragged edge of the opening above, as the beams from his electric torch fell upon it. He stumbled and struggled forward, and, rising to his feet, shot his hands upward to grip the edge above him. He would, perhaps, have given vent to a shout had not Stuart, lying immediately over the tunnel, in fact right above the figure of the German, leaned down, and, stretching his hands below him, gripped the German by the nape of the neck with one hand, and the electric torch with the other, jerking the latter back into the tunnel, where it lay with its beams flashing in the opposite direction. He then proceeded to draw the German up towards him as one draws the cork out of the neck of a bottle, to extricate him in spite of his kicks and struggles; while that other hand, set free from the torch, was clapped over his mouth, smothering any sounds of which the under-officer was capable. Not that it was an easy matter to give vent to a shout of alarm in such a position, for Stuart's huge fingers and thumb gripped the German so fiercely and firmly about the neck, just below his jaws, that movement of the latter was impossible, and the very attempt to make a sound was excessively painful. Up then he came slowly, struggling, his hands beating the earth and reaching up in the endeavour to grip his assailant, his heavily shod feet lashing to and fro and kicking clods of earth from the sides of the tunnel; up till his head was clear of the opening, till almost half his body had been extricated; and then, when Stuart, now on his feet and half upright, had placed himself in a favourable position, suddenly the German was shot back into the place from which he had just been dragged, shot back with unexpectedness and violence, till he came with a crash against the bottom of the tunnel, and, collapsing there, rolled backwards into it.

As one can imagine, though the under-officer had given vent to no sound —no shout of warning—the noise of his coming through the tunnel, the flash of his torch and its beams sweeping through the opening above, had attracted the attention of the sentry. The man faced that direction promptly,

and brought his rifle to the ready. Then for a while he waited, while Stuart was dragging the German upward, and, indeed, until there came the heavy thud which told of the under-officer's arrival at the bottom of the tunnel.

"What's that?" challenged the sentry. "Who goes there? Halt, and declare yourself!"

"Fire!" whispered Henri, and, standing up, he cast first one stone and then the other at the sentry, while Jules followed suit without waiting, a loud cry of pain and the dull sound of a blow telling that one of the missiles at least had hit the German.

"Now come!" said Stuart. "We're lucky in the fact that the fellow hasn't fired his rifle, though he's shouting hard enough to rouse every man in the camp, and will soon have them all about him. Which way, you fellows? You know more about the business and the place than I do, for I'm a stranger in these parts, and, bad luck to it, know precious little of Germany and the Germans. Bad luck, did I say? when I've seen far too much of them in these months past since I came to Ruhleben. But what's the move? Which way do we turn? Where do we go? And how are we going to get on for victuals?"

That was the worst of this sudden escape, this movement out of the camp without calm thought and contemplation of the future. They had no plans—not a single one—and they had no idea whither to go, or which way to turn, nor where they might seek safety. True, Henri and Jules had discussed the matter on many an occasion, and had, indeed, as we know, been diligently, and with much self-sacrifice, hoarding up what food they could—and in all conscience they had little enough of it—and what money they could gather. But as to their course when once in the open—that had seemed something so far in the distance, so difficult to contemplate, so very unlikely, that they had given it but the smallest consideration. And now they were face to face with the difficulty and must act promptly.

"Of course the town's out of the question," said Henri, taking upon himself to guide the party, for, indeed, as we have mentioned already, he knew his Germany well, just as well almost as he could speak the language, and both he and Jules were fluent. We have described them earlier as typical Englishmen when taking a first glance at them; and we have to declare that

they were just as typically French when one had the pleasure of making their acquaintance; but in the darkness, when no one could see their spruce and dapper appearance—and how many German youths can boast of being spruce and dapper?—when the voice alone could give an indication of the nationality of the speaker, then both Henri and Jules could pass muster as Germans with the greatest ease and security. But Stuart, this big, raw-boned, healthy, red-faced individual, was typically British in build, in gesture, and in action, and when he spoke just as typically an offspring of the British peoples. Blunt, direct, uncouth almost at times in his speech, he couldn't, had he attempted to speak German—which he did at times, and could make himself understood—have aped the guttural accents of the Teuton. He despised the German thoroughly, detested him most cordially, and perhaps it was characteristic of his bluntness that he thoroughly detested his language. Thus, while in the darkness Henri and Jules might hope to pass muster, in the case of Stuart there was not the smallest prospect of this.

"We have got to keep clear of the towns, that's the first thing to be remembered," continued Henri; "and my advice is that we stay in the open, right in the country, hiding up in woods in the daytime and marching during the night. For food we shall have to do just as best we can; beg it if possible, steal it if necessary. As to our course, it's not the time now, nor the place, in which to discuss the matter, for the first thing to do is to put as great a distance as possible between us and the camp. To-morrow, when the light comes, our guards will send out a report broadcast, and it may be that they'll put bloodhounds on our track and endeavour to follow us. So let's put the best foot forward and march on. Any direction's good enough, so long as it takes us away from Ruhleben."

Certainly any direction was good enough which would take them away from the babel of shouts and noise which had now broken out in the camp outside which they were lying, and which told plainly enough that another alarm had been given. Indeed, if the noise created by the discovery of the two prisoners in the depths of their tunnel had upset Ruhleben, had broken in a moment, as it were, the monotony of the existence of the unlucky individuals interned there now for so many months, the commotion at that time, which had drawn Henri and Jules and Stuart and many another to that

hovel, termed a hut, in the corner beneath which was the entrance to the tunnel, was nothing to the uproar which now arose, to the shouts which echoed across the dreary camp, to the reports of rifles which men, almost too aged to work, and employed as guards, let off in every direction. There was the twang of bullets in the air, while the darkness was punctuated by many a spot of flame, which showed where the sentries were doing duty. That commotion brought the Commandant flaring out of his quarters again, stamping his feet with anger, bellowing with passion. It would also have brought every one of the interned people out of his hut had not exit from them after darkness been strictly prohibited, and almost certain to be rewarded by a bullet. But guards were free to move about—those on duty and their reliefs waiting in their barracks—and fifty or more Germans can create quite a pandemonium when sufficiently excited.

As for sounds nearer to hand, they came in plenty from the corner of the camp just within the barbed-wire fencing; for there the sentry who had challenged, and who had been heavily struck by the missiles flung by Jules and Henri, screamed with pain and terror. Indeed, he was rather more frightened than hurt, though being hurt he made that an excuse for his outcry. But it was from the depths of the tunnel that the most ominous sounds were emitted. Shaken by the manner in which the lusty Stuart had thrown him through the opening, half-stunned, and not a little sick from the violent thump with which he had struck the ground, yet clinging to his senses, stung to action by fierce resentment of the treatment accorded him, and more still by the knowledge that he had been outwitted, the under-officer—that short, spare, dried-up individual who had snapped so vixenishly at the sergeant—was spluttering with wrath, was mingling his shouts with those of the sentry, and, as if that were not enough, had drawn his revolver and was blazing away at nothing.

"Time to be going," said Henri, tapping Stuart on the back; for that huge individual was leaning over the ragged opening leading into the tunnel, ready to make another attack upon the German if need be. "Time to be going, for in a little while men will be sent all round, and may cut us off. Come along."

"Which way? Where? You'll lead, eh?" asked Stuart.

"Certainly! This way—any way—straight in front of us—follow our noses," whispered Henri. "Certainly! Catch hold of my coat; Jules, take hold of Stuart, and let's push on."

One doesn't live in a camp like Ruhleben, or, indeed, in any other camp, without taking stock of one's immediate surroundings, without spending whole hours in contemplating the scenery outside, in watching things usually of little or no interest, and in finding relaxation in beholding perhaps some figure in the distance, and wondering for minutes together who it might be, where he or she had come from, and whither the same individual was going. Thus it happened that without any special effort Henri had noticed that a road passed near the camp at the very corner where they had made their escape, and ran right across the open into the distance. Where precisely it went, why individuals made their way along it, and what was the destination of those who traversed the route he was unable even to guess, and questions to the sentry had received the usual gruff, if not emphatic, refusals to answer.

"Bang straight on! We get on to the road in a little while," Henri told his friends, speaking over his shoulder; "we should, of course, keep to the open fields and make our way right across country, but it would be precious difficult during the darkness, and we should get along very much faster if we follow the road."

"Half a mo'—just wait a second," said Stuart, now that they had gained the road. "Of course I am quite ready to trust myself to you, Henri, for you and Jules are sensible sort of chaps, and we know each other now thoroughly; besides, you've backed me up splendidly in this little business. But put yourselves in the position of the Camp Commandant and of his men. A bolt-hole has been discovered in the corner of the camp, and there's a road near; now put two and two together, and it isn't very difficult—even a German can do that," he added satirically, contemptuously, if you like, for, as we have said before, the lusty Stuart had but the lowest opinion of most Teutons. "What follows? Just this: prisoners escaping find a road, and, knowing themselves to be pursued, follow it. First moral, keep off the road; second moral, find another; better still—make our escape in the very opposite direction."

It was only solid sense, British sense, horse sense as they term it in America, and, hearing him speak, Henri realized that fact immediately.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed enthusiastically, for he had a great opinion of the Englishman; "of course that's the thing to do. Well then, I've noticed that there's a road which turns away from this one a little distance ahead, and no doubt there'll be another one breaking away from that one. Let's sprint. A good fast run after life in a camp will be no disadvantage."

As a matter of fact, they were not in such soft condition as one might have anticipated, seeing that they had been confined within the barbed-wire entanglements about Ruhleben for many months past. The keenness and energy of youth, the fact that they had many companions, had helped them to keep their muscles in tolerable order, for games had been possible and football was quite a favourite. Hence a sprint along that road was not beyond them, and, doubling their arms and setting off at a good steady pace, they had soon contrived to put a mile between them and their late prison; then, slowing down a little till they discovered the other road, they turned into it and continued to run, and in a little while were well away from Ruhleben. Half an hour later they turned sharply to their left again, and, alternately running and walking, covered some fifteen miles before the morning dawned. Waiting till they had gained the top of a wooded hill, they plunged into a thick copse which offered cover, and there, as the light came, they lay down on its edge, able to survey the country all about them, feeling tolerably secure, and, let us add, amazingly hungry.

CHAPTER IV

The Heart of Germany

"A farm, I think, and a big one by the look of it. There should be food, and plenty of it, down there," said Jules, moistening his lips and springing eagerly out from the cover into the open.

Indeed, down below them, on that side of the hill where the copse was situated, a scene was spread out than which there could have been none more pleasant in France or in old England, or indeed in any other part of the world. A smiling, wooded landscape stretched into the far distance, broken into plots of neatly tilled fields, and intersected at one point by a river, which, winding between the hills and flowing sluggishly through forest country, disappeared in the distance, carrying on one of its banks the broad track of a railway. In the foreground, perhaps five hundred yards away only, there was that farm to which Jules had pointed—a typical German farm, its outhouses clustered about it, cattle in its yard, and poultry feeding round it. Smoke was issuing from one of the chimneys, and it required no great imagination on the part of those three to visualize the kitchen at the other end of the chimney—a broad, stone-flagged kitchen maybe, with a deep, old-fashioned ingle-nook, and pots and pans about it.

"Phew! It makes a fellow's mouth water," declared Stuart, looking hungrily at the farm. "To think that there are people down there who have got plenty to eat, and here are we up here simply longing for it. I suppose it wouldn't do to venture down?"

Henri shook his head emphatically.

"Not as we are, certainly not," he declared. "For residence in Ruhleben hasn't exactly improved our appearance. To begin with, Stuart—no offence, of course—you'll quite understand, a shave and haircut wouldn't come amiss, would it? As for Jules—our dandy Jules, whose socks and turn-out were the envy of all the youth of Paris—not to mention Berlin, before the war broke out—he's hardly 'it', is he?"

"Oh!"

There came an exclamation from Jules, while he grimaced at Henri.

"Not 'it'," he cried, and then laughed as he glanced at his own person and then back at Henri. "Well, a fellow has to admit that there's not one of us fit to enter decent society; but it ain't our fault, is it? Not exactly. Only, as Henri says, it would give us away badly if we went down to the farm and demanded victuals. Still, the fact remains that a chap can't help feeling

hungry, particularly when he looks at that smoke coming from the chimney, and the fowls all round. Couldn't a fellow slink down, knock one of them over with a stone, and bring it back?"

Even that was out of the question, and each one of them realized it. Their only safe course, indeed, was to remain hidden as they were in that cover till the night came again, when, tramp-like, they would take to the road once more, and, tramp-like, might rob some hen-roost to provide a meal for the morrow. Yet it was hard, and became harder still as the hours went by, to put up without even those scanty meals which had been accorded them at Ruhleben.

However, they had other things to occupy their attention when the afternoon had come, for a messenger mounted on a motor-bicycle dashed along the road, a soldier, who drew up at the farm beneath them, and, having given some message, went on his way, and could be seen calling at other farms in the far distance. Later in the evening, other sounds from the road attracted the ears of the fugitives, and, as the dusk was settling over the country, they watched a party of weary soldiers marching by, dragging behind them a couple of bloodhounds. These halted at the farm and presently entered it.

"Taken up their quarters there for the night," said Henri, "and I should say without a doubt that the cyclist messenger was sent to warn the farmers all round, while parties of men have been sent in various directions to try to trace us with hounds. Not a very pleasant outlook, is it?"

"I shouldn't care a rap," declared Stuart, "if it weren't for the hounds. Somehow or other we will obtain food and drink, and so long as we get that we can keep on marching at night-time and can hide up during the day; but hounds can track us anywhere, and will soon drive us out of cover. We have got to set ourselves to work to beat them. But how? It bothers me, and I can't see a way out of the difficulty."

Jules whistled; he often did that when he was rather bothered.

"Beastly idea being tracked by hounds," he said; "sends a chill down a fellow's spine, and makes one's hair feel like rising. But isn't there a way

out? If those hounds are put on our track—and it beats me how it is that they didn't discover that we had passed along the road—they'll soon trace us into this cover, unless we can, as the British say, contrive to draw a line across it which will break the scent and take them off in another direction. What about the river?"

"The river, of course," exclaimed Henri. "I never gave it a thought; but of course it's the thing for us. Why not start now; it's dark enough, and we can make our way straight down to it. As for food, once we get across, there's a farm yonder, just behind the railway, which might easily provide something."

They were up on their legs by now, staring into the dusk which now covered the country, and, having discussed the matter for a few moments, and seen the wisdom of an instant move, they left the trees and trudged off across the open fields till they gained a field track, and, following that, reached the bank of the river. Stepping in, they soon found themselves wading into deep water, and presently were forced to swim.

"Hold on a minute," spluttered Henri, who was leading the party, "don't let's go straight across; let the stream carry us downwards."

Flat on their backs, and keeping close together by holding hands, the trio were swept slowly down the stream till they had floated almost half a mile from the point where they had entered the water; then they struggled ashore, and, clambering up the bank and crossing the railroad, sought for the farm which they had observed from the hill-top. Twinkling lights in the windows attracted their attention, and within half an hour they were close to it.

"Better sit down for a moment and talk things over," said the cautious Stuart. "It wouldn't do for the whole three of us to go up to the place and demand food, and I'm rather doubtful if it 'ud do for even one of us. You said this morning, Henri, that not one of us was over presentable, while I should say that now that our clothing is soaked we are very much more dilapidated and unpresentable."

"Then suppose I go and skirmish about the place," Henri suggested. "If I happen to bump into someone, I speak German like a native and may easily

be able to pass muster. On the other hand, if I don't happen to meet anyone, I can pry about the place, and I should say that I am just as likely to be able to rob a hen-roost as you or Jules. You stay here, and when I whistle, answer, for otherwise it will be a dickens of a job to find you."

Gaining a road which ran beside the railway, and from which a track led up to the farm where the lights twinkled, Henri proceeded at a rapid rate till he was within a few yards of the residence, when he made a cautious circle of it and gathered the information that one of the front rooms was illuminated, while at the back of the house there was but a feeble glimmer, and from that front room came, as he listened, the sounds of music—the notes of an organ and the deep voice of a man singing.

"Fortunate," he told himself, "for it'll drown any sounds that I may make. First thing will be to investigate the back of the house, where there's that glimmer. I shouldn't wonder if it was the kitchen."

Stealing round towards the back of the house, and passing through a wicket-gate which gave entrance to the farm-yard, he tiptoed across the cobbles of the latter, and was brought up sharply by cannoning into a barrel, which fell over with a crash. Instantly Henri leapt against the wall and crouched in the deep shadow, fearful lest the noise should have alarmed the inmates, or, worse still, should have set some watch-dog barking; but no noise followed to tell him that his presence was detected, while, as if to give him greater assurance, the notes of the organ and that deep, manly voice came even louder to his ears, proving that those within the house had heard nothing.

"It's a chance in a hundred," he told himself. "Here's the back door—shut and locked—eh? No, not locked—opens easily, and—and—ah!—the twinkling light is caused by a fire—a kitchen, right enough—that looks like food; now where is it?"

Entering the place without hesitation, he groped about till his fingers lit upon a dresser, and then upon a candle, which he lit by bending over the flames of the fire and igniting the wick. Then he made a thorough search of the place, only to discover that there was not a scrap of food present.

However, there was a door leading out of the back of the kitchen into a small outhouse, and there he found a larder well stocked with provisions.

"All's fair in love and war," he said, as he looked about him. "A sausage —eh, that's something—and a round of beef, which is something better. Here's a loaf of bread, and, 'pon my word, a basket and some bottles of beer —what more does a fellow want?"

To appropriate the articles, to pop them into the basket, to blow out the candle, and to march from the kitchen were the work of a few moments. He slunk away from the farm, out through the wicket-gate, along the path which he had pursued, back towards the river, and then gave vent to a whistle. There came at once an answering whistle, and, getting his direction from the sound, Henri soon found himself by his companions.

"W—w—what have you got?" said Jules, his teeth chattering, his words broken and shredded by the cold from which he was suffering. Even the stalwart and healthy Stuart was no better.

"Y—y—yes?" he demanded, though there was no fire in his question, and but little eagerness. "W—w—what the d—d—dickens have you got in that b—b—basket? Lor! W—w—what a weight it is, and, by all the saints! b—b—beer bottles—well I'm b—b—b—blest!"

"You're beastly cold at any rate," said Henri; "too cold by far to enjoy cold bottled beer, cold beef, and cold sausage, while I'm beautifully warm, thanks to the exercise I've been taking. Look here, you fellows, it's no use our attempting to stay out here and eat our rations, for we'll catch our death of cold; and no wonder, seeing that it often freezes at night in this season. I'll tell you what we'll do. There's not a dog in that farm which I have just visited, and there are outhouses in plenty. Why not make our way to one of them and make a bed in some straw or hay if possible."

In any case active exercise was what was required by Jules and Stuart, for after their immersion in the river, and the thorough soaking they had received, lying still in the grass at the side of the road waiting for Henri's return—a cold and chilly business at any time—had become doubly cold. They were chilled to the bone now, their teeth chattering so hard that it was

with difficulty they could speak, while a natural appetite—an appetite increased by their enforced abstention from food during a whole day, their rapid crossing of the country since they had broken out of Ruhleben, and their movements on this evening—was dulled by the temperature to which their bodies had been lowered. "B—b—beastly cold," Stuart admitted, and he was the very last individual to grumble as a general rule. "S—s—sound c—c—common sense, Henri. Let's get off to these b—buildings and search for some hay. Somehow or other we must get some warmth into our bodies."

He stood in the darkness before the other two, swinging his arms with vigour and trying to beat some sort of circulation into his frigid fingers; then, picking up the basket as if to increase the warmth of his body by added effort, he went off beside Henri, Jules marching on the farther side, his teeth still chattering, utterly cold and miserable. However, the sharp walk to the farm made them feel warmer, so that they had almost stopped shivering by the time they reached the yard. From outside the window of that front room, which was still illuminated, they listened to the sound of the notes of the organ which was still being played, and to the music of that deep bass voice still warbling in the interior.

"Jolly nice it sounds too," said Stuart, "and I reckon that anyone—even a German—ought to be able to sing when in a comfortable room, probably with a nice blazing fire. A nice fire, Henri—a nice fire. George! wouldn't that be ripping!"

Henri led them on round the end of the building, through the wicket-gate into the yard, and halted again outside the kitchen door. If only they had dared enter in a body, if only they could have found a welcome in that warm place, how great a relief it would have been, what comfort it would have brought to them all, and what a pleasure it would have been after the life they had lived in Ruhleben. But if they had found little comfort in the camp where they had been interned, if they had found few or no friends amongst their guards and amongst the staff appointed to watch over them, they were just as little likely to discover friends outside the camp in any portion of Germany. Indeed, every part of the land of the Kaiser was inhabited by a people antagonistic to the last degree to an enemy amongst

them. In those early days, when Henri and Jules had first been captured, the arrogance of their captors, the hatred of the mob, and the unbridled passions of the Kaiser's people might easily have resulted in those two hapless prisoners being torn to pieces. But for the police they would probably have been slain in the streets of Berlin, for, thanks to them, all but minor injury was forbidden, while insults, blows if possible, and curses were hurled at them. But that was in August, 1914, at the commencement of the war—a war for which Germany had prepared during forty-two years of peace, a war anticipated and waited eagerly for by multitudes of Germans, and one which they believed was to make them the ruling nation of the world. That was in August, 1914, as we have said, and now see the change. Months had gone by since Germany, prepared to the last detail—with an army in full readiness and trained for its task, and with a population trained also for helpful service to the army—had thrown herself upon Russia and France and Belgium, had found them unprepared, had beaten them back, had decimated the country of King Albert of the Belgians, had made Louvain a shambles, and had set the streets of Dinant running with the blood of her victims. Yet she had not triumphed. She had captured enemy country, to be sure, she had driven France and the British ally—which had so quickly come to the side of the French—back towards the sea-coast, and she had hurled Russia out of East Prussia, and, after the sturdy advance of the Grand Duke Nicholas into Galicia and the fall of the fortress of Przemysl, had fallen upon him with mighty force, had discovered the Russians short of ammunition and of artillery, and had driven the forces of the Tsar back towards Warsaw and other cities. Yes, Germany had gained much territory, and had lost many, many lives. Yet, see what now faced her; not victory, but embarrassment on every side: a trench-line running from north to south in Russia—a trench-line against which her weakened battalions had battered in vain, a line held by the forces of the Tsar, even though short of ammunition, so securely that Germany could not advance; and on the west another trench-line, which, after the battle of the Marne, had been extended westward and northward to the sea-coast and blocked the advance of the Kaiser's forces just as securely as did those lines in Russia.

In short, the triumphal march of Germany had been abruptly stopped, in spite of those forty-two years of preparation. The prize so nearly seized—so certain to fall to the armies of Prussia, as the people of Germany thought—

Paris, in fact, had been snatched from the armies of the Kaiser at the very last moment; the cup of triumph had, indeed, been dashed to pieces on the Marne, where French and British soldiers, turning at bay after that glorious retreat from Mons, had fallen upon the Germans, had driven them north across the river, had sent them fleeing to the Aisne, and had there read them a lesson.

Possessing still much territory of her enemies, but checked on every side, Germany had yet not achieved her object by a great deal. She had, in fact, failed most utterly and most miserably; for to have proved successful —as successful as she had designed and had confidently hoped to be—she should, in the first few months of the war, have thoroughly beaten the French and have crushed the armies of the Tsar. But she had failed to do either, in spite of her treacherous invasion of Belgium; for the coming of the British had helped not a little to turn the tables. It had held up the advance on Paris, it had helped to drive the Germans over the Marne, it had held the gate to Calais at Ypres—where the forces sent from England had shattered the Prussian Guard, the best of Germany's troops. Indeed, one may say that the inclusion of Great Britain in the fighting had given vital assistance to France and Belgium and Russia, had gone some long way to check the mad triumphal rush of the German bully upon her unready enemies, and had assisted in the erection of that barrier of trenches which held the enemy in check; while, beyond the fighting-line, Britain called for her volunteers to form new armies, and France completed the mobilization of her men and made ready to shatter the invader.

Disappointment had taken the place of elation, of arrogance, in Germany. Bitter hatred of England was paramount, and, next to it, detestation of France and all that was French. Such hatred was greater, we may say, amongst the civil population of Germany than amongst the men in the army. Indeed, so great was it that had the treatment of prisoners of war been left to them—treatment none too good and often diabolical when conducted by officials of the army—not a prisoner would have survived; and, for the same reason, escaping prisoners, such as Jules and Henri and Stuart, might look for little else from the inhabitants of Germany than blows, than immediate betrayal to guards, than persecution and harsh treatment.

"Here we are on the far side of the yard, and this looks like an open shed in which carts are stored. Yes, carts," repeated Henri, having driven his shin rather violently against a shaft, and with difficulty refrained from giving loud expression to his feelings. "Let's have a look at the roof. Stop here a minute, while I prospect and see whether there's a loft."

Stepping back into the yard, he stared up overhead, and, thanks to the fact that the night was not excessively dark, was able to detect the line of roof as it cut across the sky. From its height it gave promise of a loft under its shelter, and, searching round for some access to it, Henri presently stumbled upon a wooden staircase. Clambering up it, he was astonished to find a glimmer of light coming through the chinks of a door on his left, and, applying his eye to those chinks, discovered a fire burning on a brick hearth in a room of small dimensions. To open the door quietly was the most sensible procedure, and, lifting the latch and pushing the door before him, he carefully investigated every corner of the room.

"Looks as though it were used by some farm hand, or a groom of some sort," he told himself. "In any case, it's warm and comfortable and untenanted, and will allow us to strip off our clothes and dry ourselves."

Turning abruptly on his heel, he crept slowly down the staircase, and very soon had brought Stuart and Jules to the warm quarters he had discovered. There, indeed, they stripped off their wet clothing and hung it in front of the fire, which, by diligent prodding and by an addition of logs which lay beside it, was soon giving off a fine heat, and was crackling and blazing merrily.

"A mighty fine feed," declared Stuart, now without a stutter in his voice and without a chatter about his teeth. "Henri, my boy, you're a nobleman, or ought to be one; and if you aren't, all I can say is, that the French Government don't know what they're doing. And because why? Well, now, I'll just tell you," he proceeded, his mouth half full of sausage, a huge piece in one hand, and a slice of bread in the other, while between his feet, as he stood on the floor, there rested a bottle of beer already opened. "Because why, my boy? Well, here's the reason: our friend Henri contrived, in the first place, to attract our attention to a spot in Ruhleben where escape seemed possible—I'm not going to say that he was the chief cause of our

undertaking the venture, but he was one of us—accompanied us to the outside of the entanglements, and led us away from the camp. It was his and Jules's idea to escape those dogs by swimming and floating all this distance down the river, and, though we ain't altogether clear of 'em yet, we're on the high road to be so. But—and here I'll take a denial from no one"—and at that moment he looked across at Jules, as if to challenge him to controvert the statement—"but our friend Henri is the man mainly responsible for bringing us to the farm, for procuring, first of all, food and drink, and then providing warm quarters. If I was the French Government, he'd have every honour possible. As it is, why—well—" said Stuart, hesitating, and taking another bite of sausage, "why, now—I'll drink his health, and that's the best I can do at the moment."

He lifted the bottle, and, tossing his head back, let the frothy fluid, so beloved of the Germans, trickle into his mouth and down his throat, and, gasping at last, replaced it on the floor beside him. Yes, it was a meal which delighted the hearts of all three of them, a meal to be looked back upon, one which, if they escaped safely from the country and lived to tell the tale, would be spoken of in glowing terms as a reminiscence to be thankful for, and an item amongst hundreds during their adventure to be emphasized, to be picked out as momentous, and to be expatiated on in the warmest language.

"And now, what do we do?" asked Stuart, when the meal was finished and each had enjoyed a cigarette—for the cautious Stuart had brought some with him. "One's natural inclination is to stretch out on these boards and sleep in the warmth of the fire; but that, just as naturally, raises the question as to whether it would be wise, and as to whether it would not lead to certain discovery in the morning."

"Of course we could take it in turns to sit up and watch," suggested Henri, yawning widely as he spoke; "but then, we are all of us dead tired, and the chances are that anyone who attempted to keep awake would be overpowered by drowsiness. It looks to me as though it would be far better for us to clear up the mess we have made and to retire into the loft; that is to say, if there is one. And I've another suggestion to offer: it may be that to-morrow we shall find our exit from the farm cut off, or we may find that we

have to keep away from all dwellings as we cross country; that points to the need of replenishing the commissariat at this stage, particularly as we know that there is food almost within a stone's throw of us."

The big, beefy, ruddy, and smiling face of Stuart was turned upon him promptly.

"My boy," he exclaimed, smacking Henri heavily on the shoulder, "my boy, didn't I say that you were deserving of the highest honours, and here is another reason for giving you rewards. The idea of food for to-morrow had escaped my notice altogether, and I would say that both Jules and I were so satisfied with what we have had that we didn't give a thought to it. But it's just plain common sense—the common sense which you seem to have got a store of, Henri—which should prepare us to look to to-morrow, to make provision for the future, particularly when it can be done so easily. You get off, Henri, but take care that that fellow with the voice doesn't spot you. Jules and I will search round in the buildings for a loft, and then we'll return to this room and wait for you."

Separating at the door of the room, and leaving a goodly portion of their clothing still hanging in the warmth of the fire, the three parted, Jules and Stuart clambering up the staircase, which ascended again after it had passed the landing at the door of the room they had just vacated, while Henri slid to the floor below, and, marching into the yard, crossed to the kitchen doorway. Pausing there for a while, he listened for the notes of the organ, and presently heard them and the sound of a woman singing, a coarse, guttural, bucolic voice, very different from the other. As for the kitchen, the fire still flickered on the hearth, while the place was untenanted, and once more Henri, emboldened by the success of his previous visit, lit the candle at the fire, looked serenely about him, and entered the little storehouse at the end of the kitchen.

Perhaps three minutes later he emerged from that place with two baskets more than fully laden; for, be it mentioned, if the towns and cities of Germany at these times were feeling the pinch of war, if the blockade of the British Fleet had deprived the Kaiser's subjects of many food-stuffs and other commodities, and if, indeed, as undoubtedly was the case, there was shortage in many parts of Germany, there was still without doubt,

abundance in many a farm and homestead, abundance, that is to say, of home-produced articles. Thus, there were strings of sausages in that larder, ready for the hand which sought to take them, there were hard-baked biscuits and bread, and home-brewed beer in abundance. It was indeed with provisions and drink enough to last for several days that Henri struggled from the larder into the kitchen, and, having blown out the candle and replaced it where he had found it, went to the door that led to the yard and made ready to emerge from it. It was indeed in that precise position that his further progress was suddenly arrested; for, as he pulled the door open and prepared to step into the yard, a gang of men came to the corner of the building, and, thrusting their way through that gate which gave admission to the yard, suddenly accosted him in the doorway. They were Germans; they were a party of guards sent from Ruhleben; and beyond them, secured to leashes, were a couple of dogs, sent with them to hound down the prisoners who had escaped from the camp.

CHAPTER V

Eluding the Pursuers

If a picture could have been taken of the astonished and nonplussed Henri at the precise moment when, as he stood half within and half without the door of the farmhouse from which he had been purloining food and drink, he was accosted by that German party from Ruhleben, his own devoted mother would have undoubtedly had the utmost difficulty in recognizing her offspring. To begin with, having discarded his drenched clothing and left it in that room which had provided such warmth and comfort to himself and Stuart and Jules, Henri had, because no other change was possible for the moment, borrowed an old pair of trousers hanging on the wall, which, from their dilapidated and mud-stained appearance, may well have belonged to the farm hand—the usual occupant of the building. An equally tattered coat was over his shoulders, while his bare feet were thrust into a pair of heavily nailed boots, which had been cleaned perhaps a

year before. There was no hat on his head, and, thanks to his swim in the river, his hair—which had grown excessively long in Ruhleben—hung lankly over his eyes and forehead, producing altogether an appearance not very uncommon in the country. To be very precise, if not complimentary, we must admit that the usually debonair and dapper Henri looked like the village idiot at that moment; while his astonishment, causing his mouth to open, gave his face a vacant expression which matched well with his appearance.

"Ho, you at the door, and at the very right moment! What's this? Bring a light and throw it on him. Heavens! What a scarecrow! Where's your master, lad; and where are you going?"

A big, burly man, a non-commissioned officer, one of the staff at Ruhleben, barred Henri's progress, and, snatching the lantern which one of his men carried, held it over the youth he had accosted and surveyed him closely.

[Illustration: "A BIG BURLY MAN, A NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICER OF THE STAFF AT RUHLEBEN, BARRED HENRI'S PROGRESS" (missing from book)]

"Baskets—eh? And full of provender—beer and sausages and bread—well I never!" gasped the Sergeant. "Who may you be, my lad? And where's your master? That's a question you haven't answered, and, besides, who's all this stuff for? Good food and drink, and going outside the farm-house!"

He lowered his lamp and threw the rays of light on to the baskets and their contents, while his hungry eyes fixed themselves upon the sausages. Henri giggled. Intuitively he realized that he must indeed look like a scarecrow, and, employing his quick wits, that French perception which led him so quickly to realize the situation, he determined to act up to it. Not that he felt much inclined to giggle or ready for mirth; for, indeed, he was almost trembling with agitation. At any moment the door of the kitchen might be burst open by the farmer himself, and he would be discovered.

The Sergeant had, indeed, spoken in the loudest tones—in those rough, bullying, spluttering tones so common to German sergeants, so loudly that he had drowned the sound of the organ beyond and the voice of the woman who was singing. Henri suppressed a shiver, giggled inanely again, and listened for sounds from the far part of the farm-house. Yes, he could hear the organ still, and that voice droning on, and at once took comfort.

"Sausages, Sergeant," he said, smirking at him, and lifting the basket so that the man could see its contents more clearly. "You like sausages too, and you are hungry, you and your men, eh?"

And once more the Frenchman giggled in the face of the non-commissioned officer.

"Why, yes. Now that you mention it, a man's mostly hungry who tramps the country at night, and rushes about the place in search of prisoners. Listen, youngster; you've seen three men crossing this way—three men who have broken out of Ruhleben?"

Henri looked at him vacantly.

"Prisoners?" he asked. "Germans?"

"Germans!" the man exclaimed. "What next! Why, two Frenchmen and a bull-necked, red-faced Englishman. Say, have you seen them?"

Once more Henri giggled inanely and lifted his basket.

"And about the sausages," he reminded the Sergeant; "you like them? You are hungry? Well, now, there are plenty in the larder; light up the kitchen, and take your seats; I'll be back in a few minutes, and will call the master to you."

They pressed round him, that sergeant and his men; pushed him rudely aside, and made their way, talking in loud voices, into the kitchen—talking so loudly, indeed, that those inhabitants of the farm-house, enjoying a musical evening, heard them, and, ceasing at once the playing of their organ, stood to their feet and listened. A minute later the doorway leading

from the hall into the kitchen was burst open, and a very startled, very frightened, and exceedingly rotund and healthy farmer pushed his way into the apartment.

As for Henri, he crossed the yard in half a dozen strides, gained the staircase, and raced up it, to discover Stuart and Jules seated by the fire, chatting and smoking.

"My word!" exclaimed Jules as Henri entered; "two baskets of provender this time, and full—both of them. Now listen to us, Henri; we've found a beautiful little hole in a bundle of hay in the loft close handy, and, from the position of the place, we believe it to be seldom entered. It's just the spot in which to pass the night, and sleep throughout the following day if need be."

"And you listen for a moment," said Henri, speaking swiftly. "A party of Germans from Ruhleben have just reached the farm, and I met them face to face. I thought they would have recognized me, for amongst them was one whom I remember to have seen doing sentry duty; but I'm such a scarecrow in these clothes, and so dishevelled, that they took me for some farm hand or village lout, and let me pass. But in a little while they will be asking questions of the farmer, there'll be a hue and cry, and they'll know that one of the prisoners who escaped has been close to them. We must move. That comfortable little spot, which sounds so inviting, is out of the question. Let's pick up our clothes and make a dash into the open. It looks to me almost as if we should have to swim the river again, for there are two bloodhounds with the party I accosted, and they may easily trace us."

Pulling on their still damp clothing as rapidly as they could, they sent Jules first of all to the bottom of the staircase, to make sure that there was no sign of the farmer or his visitors; then Henri and Stuart each picked up a basket, and, stealing down into the yard, made their way out of it, and, skirting the house, gained the highway. Pressing along it, walking at a rapid rate, they pushed on during the hours of darkness, and just as the light began to grow, seeing some buildings away to their right, turned off along a country lane which led towards them, and presently discovered themselves to be close to a sugar factory, at one end of which a water-tower was erected. Carefully looking around them, to make sure that no one was about, they sought for a door, and, entering a yard round which buildings

were erected, presently discovered a wide door which was unbolted. Entering without hesitation, and closing it after them, they found themselves in a huge apartment with bins on every side, with overhead shafts and pulleys. At the far end a staircase led to another floor, and, ascending that, they found themselves in an apartment of similar dimensions, the floor space of which was occupied by machines of various patterns. At the far end, where the tower was erected, there was another doorway, and passing through it they clambered up the steep stone stairs, which finally led them to a small room at the top, above which was an iron-girdered ceiling supporting a huge water-tank, to which supplies were pumped no doubt from the river. Having groped their way in the semi-darkness to this spot, they barred the door of the room by driving a wedge in above the latch, and then, thoroughly tired out after their long tramp and their adventures of the previous day and night, they lay down to sleep, careless almost of the consequences.

Two whole days passed during which Henri and his friends were unable to move from the room to which they had gained access—two days during which they slept in turns, and rested, while the one who watched posted himself at one of the four windows which looked out from each side of the tower, and surveyed the surrounding country. From that post of vantage they were able to see the river which they had crossed higher up, and even the roof of the farm where they had obtained food and temporary shelter; they could observe every feature of the country, the yard below, the hosts of women workers in the sugar factory, the coming and going of important-looking factory officials, and even the passage of search-parties along the road in their quest for the prisoners.

"It looks to me as though we'd found a safe haven," said Henri, when he had been on duty for some hours and the others had awakened. "I watched a party coming down the road with two dogs, and I'm sure that they are the fellows who so nearly captured me at the farm yonder. They turned up towards this factory, called loudly for the manager, and made a survey of the buildings. For all I know they may even have come to the foot of the tower, but they certainly did not ascend the staircase. You can imagine that I took particular notice of the bloodhounds who accompanied them."

"Ha!" exclaimed Stuart. "Show any signs of excitement—eh? Did they look about them and sniff as though they had scented us?"

"Not a bit of it. They were as quiet as lambs, and seemed utterly bored with the whole business, and as if they were thoroughly tired of being dragged at the heels of the search-party. As for the men, they looked weary and fagged out after their tramp, and I imagine that they take little interest in the business. You've got to remember that we've been now something like three days away from Ruhleben, and the authorities must know that we've had plenty of time to get farther away from the camp. They'd hardly be looking for us now so near it, and no doubt they've telegraphed our description across the country. That being so, it seems to me that the wisest course for us is to stay here as long as possible, until the hue and cry has died down and the event has been forgotten."

"And then," asked Jules inquisitively, "what's to happen? We are still a precious long way from France or from any of the neutral countries. It's time, I should think, that we made a plan for the future, for up to now we've followed the road, as it were, of least resistance; we took the direction which seemed best under pressing circumstances, and did not head for any particular destination."

"Then what about Holland?" demanded Stuart; "the people are friendly enough, and, if one only knew the truth, are precious frightened of the Germans. Once across the frontier there we shall receive hospitality; and, seeing that the Germans are hardly frightened of the Dutch, the frontier will not be so very heavily guarded. But in the direction of France and Belgium there's that trench-line we've heard so much about, and where I'd give a lot to be fighting."

"Holland's the country we should make for undoubtedly," agreed Henri, when they had discussed the matter a little further. "But in which direction it lies, precisely, is rather difficult to determine; we shall have to leave that to the future, and of course must find out the way by asking questions. That means that we must discover disguises first of all, and that is a thing that wants a lot of doing. As to staying here, I feel quite sure that it's a wise procedure; and, thanks to the food and the drink we brought along, we have

rations enough, if we husband them carefully, to last for quite four or five days longer."

It was not particularly exciting or exhilarating in that lofty room at the top of the tower, and went little way towards meeting the wishes of any one of the party, yet the plan met with the hearty approval of the canny Stuart, and, since Henri himself had proposed it, met with the ready assent of Jules. That they had food sufficient to last them for several days was quite certain, while the question of drink was cleared up already—for they had discovered a trap-door in the girdered ceiling above them and an iron ladder outside the door of the room, which, when put in position, gave access to it. Clambering up that, one very early morning when a mist hung over the country, Henri had discovered a narrow gallery surrounding the huge water-tank, and, lifting the inspection-door over the latter, had found it full of water. It was from this that they replenished their supplies at night, and so made certain of the fact that, however long they remained as prisoners in that place, thirst would not assail them.

At the end of the week, however, impatience to be moving on was beginning to try them far more than their enforced idleness, and many a discussion did they indulge in with reference to their future movements. Numerous and various were the suggestions made by one or other of the party, but, excellent though some of them may have been, on discussion all were vetoed. Yet, something must be done, something definite decided upon; and finally, in desperation almost, Henri decided to emerge from their hiding-place and make a closer investigation of their surroundings.

"It stands to reason," he told his friends at the end of one of these fruitless discussions—"it stands to reason that if we leave the place now—and in the course of a few hours we shall be forced to, seeing that our food-supply is almost gone—we shall be hardly any better off than we were at the commencement; for you have to remember that a full and complete description of us has been telegraphed broadcast, and, though the novelty of the event has now worn off, no doubt there are hundreds of police officers on the look-out for us. Thus it follows that to make our escape successful we must either march at night-time only—which renders the purchase of food almost an impossibility, and compels us to steal it or get it in much the

same way as we got this supply from the farm building—or we must find disguises which will alter our appearance entirely and allow us even to board a train and travel with ordinary people. I'll take a look round while you fellows stay up here. If I'm caught—well, it's bad luck, that's all, and needn't spoil your chances."

Slipping out of the room when dusk had fallen, and the voices of the work-people had subsided and their retreating footsteps had died away in the distance, Henri gained the huge room below, and, descending to the lower floor, made his way out into the yard; then, taking the utmost caution to guard against surprise, he visited each of the buildings in turn, narrowly escaping, in one of them, running face to face with a workman engaged in attending to a machine. Retreating hurriedly, he once more gained the yard, and finally gained a corridor which gave access to the manager's buildings. It was perhaps half an hour later, when Jules and Stuart were growing anxious, and were listening eagerly for sounds of their friend's return, that they heard steps on the stone staircase leading to their chamber.

"Henri without a doubt," said Stuart, a note of relief in his voice, for the lusty fellow had taken an enormous liking for Henri. "That's good! I was really beginning to get awfully anxious about him."

"And I had almost given him up for lost," said Jules, equally relieved. "There he is, just outside the door. Ha, Henri! we began to think that you would never return, and now——"

The two inmates of the room, peering through the dusk as the door opened, saw an unfamiliar figure enter: a man dressed in baggy clothing, a man whose eyes were encircled by the broad rims of heavy glasses, and upon whose head sat an absurdly small Homberg hat. He was a man getting on in years, one would have said—though the dusk made the question uncertain—yet a man who stepped actively, whose breath was not tried by the long ascent, and who knew his path well, and was thoroughly acquainted with the door-way. Could it be Henri?—Henri in disguise? A low chuckle escaped the man—a merry giggle—and then Henri's well-known voice awoke the silence.

"I do wish that it were daylight," he told Stuart and Jules; "you'd then see something that 'ud be good for sore eyes."

"Sore eyes—eh? It isn't so very dark here, and I can see enough to startle me as it is," came the astonished rejoinder. "What on earth have you been doing, Henri; and what's the meaning of this get-up? Of course, it's a disguise; but, bless us! what a disguise!"

"Stop! How's this, then? I'll do the heavy German, and you can judge the effect."

The gay, yet thoughtful, Henri closed the door of the room, and, with what was left of the fast-receding daylight illuminating his person, struck an attitude. Leaning on the stick with which he had provided himself, he twirled the heavy moustaches—artificial affairs which he had contrived to become possessed of—and glared at his comrades through that pair of big-rimmed spectacles which so completely altered his appearance. Then he talked to them—cross-questioned his friends in the gruff, staccato accents one might have expected from such an individual as he represented himself to be.

"German—the heavy German official—from the crown of that ridiculous hat right down to your big flat feet," declared Stuart with gusto, when the little performance was finished. "I'd never have thought it possible, but that moustache has done wonders, and now that one really gets a good glimpse of you, for it isn't so dark after all, I've no hesitation in saying that I'd pass you in the street every day and fail to spot you as Henri."

"As Henri, or even as a Frenchman," added Jules, "or even as any alien or enemy of the Germans. It's tremendous, Henri, a ripping turn-out! How did you manage it? And where on earth did you lay your hands on such garments?"

The somewhat bulky and voluminous individual who had joined them sat down before Stuart and Jules and treated the two of them to an amiable grin, made all the more amiable and owl-like by those glasses.

"I couldn't help grinning at myself," he told them after a minute; "the whole thing seems so awfully cheeky. But, 'pon my word! it occurs to me that cheek is more likely to carry one through in business of this sort than the greatest caution. Cheek and luck did it at that farm and deceived that German party, and now let us hope the same two things—you can't call them virtues—will set us safely in France. How did I do it?—eh! Well, I searched the machine-shops down below, and precious nearly ran my head against a workman; then I crossed the yard, and, on the principle that when you are in quest of anything it's better often enough to go to head-quarters, I boldly made for the manager's office. He's a bit of a Jew, that manager, and it appears that he sleeps in his office, or, rather, in a room attached to it. Anyway, he had quite an assortment of clothing, and I should imagine this to be his best suit, the sort of thing he wears when he's holiday-making—that is, if a German ever does take a holiday. It doesn't exactly fit to a T—it's too loose and baggy, I admit—but it'll do, and the glasses and the moustache help considerably. As to the moustache—well, I fancy the manager occasionally indulges in theatricals. He can't have wanted a false moustache for himself, for I've caught a glimpse of him before now from one of these windows, so it must be that he kept the paraphernalia about for dressing up other people. Talking of dressing up other people reminds me of you two. Stuart's the difficulty; he's so big and bony and strong. Jules would make a splendid girl, if he'd only remember to walk decently and not stride along as he does; but Stuart, what's to be done with him? I thought once of taking him along as my wife, dressed in a most elaborate costume I found in the manager's box of accessories; but it wouldn't do, for, though German women are fat enough in all conscience, heavily built like our friend opposite, they are not so broad in the shoulders, nor so bony."

Stuart's eyes had opened wide as Henri spoke, and more than once a flush came into his face. He felt half-angry for a moment, and then more than half-amused. A second later he seemed to have conjured up a picture of himself dressed as the heavy German lady, the wife of this baggy-breeched, spectacled German, represented by Henri, and the picture set him laughing, softly at first, then, with his mouth wide open, on the point of emitting a roar of mirth. Fortunately, however, Jules caught him in the act, and, clapping one hand over his mouth, arrested the sounds.

"Of course," he said, "if you want to shout and call in the whole crew outside, well, do so; only give us a little time to make our exit beforehand. I'm convinced now, after what Henri said, that you're going to be a trouble to us. You're too big, too big and too heavy by far to be smuggled through the country as a woman, and, 'pon my word, in whatever disguise you are hid—if one can hide such a monster—there's always the danger of your giving us away by ribald laughter."

You might have expected the huge Stuart to boil over with anger after such an outburst, and, indeed, Jules's indignant reproaches were uttered with that purpose; but, as we have inferred before, this great Englishman was not only big and strong and disgustingly healthy, the envy of all in Ruhleben camp, the suspected of every German guard in the place—for how could a fellow retain such proportions with such attenuated diet?—but, boasting of an excellent digestion, the fellow was seldom in an ill humour. Even when he grumbled and said scathing things of the Germans, he was half laughing, and it required a very great deal of annoyance indeed to rouse his passions. Yet the smallest hint of disloyalty to Great Britain, the smallest slur cast on his country's people, roused the giant in this fellow; then those muscles of his were braced for action. And if Henry and Jules had previously had any doubts as to his prowess, these were set at rest after they had witnessed his manner of tackling that under-officer at the mouth of the tunnel. But the friendly gibes of the merry Jules—this somewhat dilapidated and war-worn Frenchman, this individual who had come to Ruhleben camp months before as dapper as Henri, with clothes cut in the masterful manner peculiar to your London tailor, with boots of immaculate appearance, and socks which till then had been the envy of many a youngster—could not rouse Stuart. He was above such petty matters. He could read the meaning in the heart, could see deeply into the characters of the two who were his companions, and, seeing so clearly, the big fellow seated on the floor merely stared back at Jules and Henri and grinned a huge, capacious grin, which took them both in in the semi-darkness, which almost aggravated them, and which finally set them both laughing.

"I'll admit," he said then, almost shamefacedly—"I'll admit that I'm big and strong and bony, and a difficulty under the circumstances. Now, Henri can pass anywhere, I'm sure, as he's dressed and got up; and Jules, well,

Jules should make a most dainty little German girl; but there's me—well," he went on, speaking slowly, "that's a job that can soon be ended, and I'll tell you how. You two will get off to-night, and board the nearest train, if you take my advice."

"And you?" demanded Henri.

"Yes, you?" asked Jules inquisitively.

"Oh, I? Well, I'll stay here for a time, and then I'll fare for myself. Supposing we have a race to the Dutch frontier? I shouldn't wonder if I got there as soon as you do, for I'm strong and big, and, you see, I can walk during the night, and, well—all's fair in love and war—there's many a hen-roost that I can rob on my journey."

Spoken flippantly enough, there was yet steady determination in the words of Stuart. He meant everything he said, and most generously gave up his prospects, at least of companionship, for the sake of those companions. More than that, he probably gave up all chances of making good his escape from Germany, for the task of marching to the Dutch frontier was no light one. Henri looked at him swiftly, and then across at Jules, who coughed uncomfortably enough, half-opened his mouth as if to speak, and then remained silent. At last Henri managed to address Stuart.

"You're rotting!" he said sharply.

"On the contrary, never more serious in all my life."

"Then you're——"

"Say it," said Stuart sweetly. "A fool, you were going to say, I think."

"No. Shake hands," Henri demanded, stretching out one of his own. "It's good to have a chum such as you are, Stuart, good to know that amongst France's allies there is such a fellow. From all accounts the British have stuck well by the French, as the French have stuck by the British. We haven't had much news through, but from what one's heard it appears that the British, retreating from Mons on the left of the French armies, did

France an enormous and inestimable service—saved, indeed, our left flank from being crumpled up and driven in on the centre, helped to save Paris, and finally helped to defeat von Kluck's army. It wasn't only by pluck and endurance that British officers and soldiers did that; it was by a considerable display of self-sacrifice. What's this but a self-sacrificing plan on your part? And you think that we are going to agree?—that Jules and I will accept the proposal, and leave you here alone to face all the difficulties of escaping from Germany—you, who besides being big, as we have already said, hardly know a word of the language? Fool wasn't the word that I was going to use, Stuart, it was something stronger. Shake hands again. Jules and I refuse to leave the place unless you come with us."

There was silence for a while, and then the three set to work again to discuss plans for leaving the factory. It seemed, indeed, that Henri had made quite a find in the manager's office, and that he had already selected a dress for Jules which would suit that young gentleman splendidly; and at length it was decided that Stuart should be dressed in a suit of good material—such as might be worn by a dependant—and that he should accompany the party as if he were a male nurse looking after the aged Henri. That night, indeed, having raided the manager's office again, and relieved him of things essential to their journey, the three set off from the place, and about eleven o'clock on the following day were to be observed on an adjacent railway station. An old gentleman, who peered through round goggles, who stumbled as he walked, and whose shoulders and head were bent and wobbling, traversed the platform on the arm of a girl of fascinating appearance; while in the rear came a huge, ugly fellow, with reddish hair and brilliant complexion, on whose head was thrust a hat which overhung and darkened his features, and who carried a bag—none other than the one in which the manager of the sugar factory had been wont to carry his possessions.

A train came in, and the three embarked upon it. The whistle sounded shrilly, smoke issued from the engine, and in a trice they were off on another stage of their adventurous journey.

CHAPTER VI

Changing their Direction

"Crikey! What a do! What a performance! Who'd have thought it?" gasped the huge Stuart, flinging himself back on the seat in the compartment and staring out of the window as the train moved away from the station. "Henri, you're a wizard, a conjuror, a most mysterious and clever individual. 'Pon my word, I looked at you as you boarded the train, and if I'd been a German official, one of these thick-headed, beer-drinking tubs of fellows, always on the look-out for aliens and enemies, I'd have failed to spot you."

"Magnificent!" ventured Jules, rubbing his hands and moving his limbs in a most unladylike fashion, in such masculine manner, in fact, that the cautious Henri, ever on the look-out for something which might attract the attention of enemies swarming about them, immediately pounced upon him.

"That's not right," he said; "no girl would sit like that, Jules, and you know it. Indeed, who should know it better than you, who, up to the outbreak of this war, were a regular lady's man? You've studied the fair sex, my boy, and now's the time to take advantage of that study."

Stuart guffawed. The whole adventure was so droll, so full of little incidents which tickled his mirth and which prompted laughter, that it was as much as he could do to keep his big, healthy features steady. And, seeing that they were in a compartment by themselves, why not make merry? For during the last two hours their actions had had to be serious enough in all conscience, and, indeed, the big Englishman spoke only the truth when he said that Henri had behaved like a perfect wizard. Stumbling down the platform, that ridiculously small Homberg hat only partially covering thin wisps of white hair—artificially whitened, let us explain, with the aid of some chalk—upon a head which if it were not bald, looked as if it ought to be so, Henri had acted the role of a feeble, querulous, short-sighted, and somewhat arrogant old gentleman to the life. He had snarled at his daughter—or his wife, whichever Jules was supposed to be, and, from the obvious youth of the young lady, probably she was the former. He had snapped at the big, beefy attendant who came behind him, and, reaching the train and making an effort to clamber aboard it—a none too easy performance on Continental railways—he had stumbled even more, had contrived to get into a position half-within and half-without the carriage, and had there stuck firmly, become jammed, as it were, a position which roused the wrath of the old gentleman still higher, which set him snarling at his lady companion, and caused him to throw a fiery imprecation at his attendant. It caused the officious station-master to hasten forward, and then, at the sight of this arrogant and somewhat important old

gentleman, to bow obsequiously and assist his entrance to the carriage. Yes, altogether it was a splendid addition to their adventures.

"It's enough to make a cat laugh," said Stuart. "But here we are; and well now, I'm just wondering what our friend—sorry, your friend, Henri!—the manager of the sugar factory, will be saying just about this moment? Of course he'll learn that someone has entered his quarters."

Learn it, indeed! At that very moment the portly individual in question was in the centre of his bedroom, surveying the contents of a box which had been sadly depleted. He was rubbing the grizzly locks beside one ear, pondering deeply, staring through big goggles at the box, and trying to understand what had happened.

"But no," he said aloud; "I have not taken the things. Then who? And see this—my best suit of clothes has gone, my hat, and the goggles I placed on this chest last evening."

He made a movement towards the bell, and then dashed back, and once more came to an abrupt halt, pausing with feet far apart, with eyes peering into the distance, with wrinkled forehead, and with one hand still rubbing his grizzly locks.

"But, a thousand thunders! Then what does this mean?" he demanded, so loudly that a clerk dashed in from the adjacent office and asked what had happened. "Happened, indeed! Then see here, my Fritz, this box of clothing has been pilfered. My clothes are gone—my best suit of clothes—my hat, and what more I cannot say. Who, then, can have paid my quarters a visit?"

It puzzled the clerk also. For a while the two discussed the question in the most animated and Teutonic manner. Then a brilliant idea seized upon the brain of the clerk—an idea which sent a hot flush from the top of his head to the soles of his somewhat flat feet.

"That party of soldiers who came here a little time ago," he cried; "those prisoners who broke out of Ruhleben—who else, mein Herr Winterborgen—who else can have wanted such clothing, such disguises? Listen, there were three of them; now say what clothing you are missing."

When a further investigation was made of the losses which the portly manager had sustained, the incriminating fact was discovered that, besides his best suit of clothes and Homberg hat, a woman's dress and a man's had been purloined. That sent the manager flying to the telephone, and in due course of time set the police officials at the nearest police station bustling. Within half an hour a car dashed up to the gates of the sugar factory, and the most important and imposing of individuals commenced an official investigation on the spot. This investigation, sternly carried out, weighed every point so very closely, and went with so much minuteness into every little incident, that it set the unfortunate manager perspiring, and, indeed, after a while, made him begin to wonder

whether he himself were a party to the theft which he had suffered, or a party to assisting the fugitives. The important official, if he did not actually accuse the manager of having aided the prisoners supposed to have purloined the articles of clothing, inferred it certainly, glared at the unhappy man, browbeat him in regular Germanic manner, and made him regret deeply that he had ever called for police assistance.

"You'll be ready to report personally at the police station," he was told. "Now I'll return and set a search in progress. Without doubt the three men who broke out of Ruhleben have paid you a visit; for we know already that they went to a farm farther back along the road and obtained supplies of food. Since then we have lost all sight of them, and it may very well be that they have been in hiding; and that may mean," he added severely, as he stood above the unhappy manager and glared down at him, "that someone has been providing a refuge for them, some unpatriotic and treacherous individual, who, if discovered, will certainly be shot in the morning—be shot in the cold, early morning," he added in unpleasant tones which did not fail to have their effect on the man he was addressing. "Yes, Herr Winterborgen, this is an important matter—so important, indeed, that for your own sake you will see that you attend promptly when called for."

It was with a gasp of relief that the manager saw the car driven away at furious speed, while he stood staring out of the window, mopping his forehead with a handkerchief. His thoughts were still in a whirl, and even then he could not shake from his mind the more than half belief that in some unconscious way he had indeed, unwittingly and unwillingly —for he was as good a patriot as anyone—aided the runaways. In such a dilemma, feeling vexed and sore at his own loss, and indignant at the cross-examination he had just suffered, it was but natural that he should work himself up into a terrible passion, and should turn the vials of his wrath upon the police inspector who had treated him so brusquely. Yet in time, when his anger had died down, he, like every other patriot in Germany, put his own personal disadvantage aside for the sake of his beloved Fatherland. He sighed deeply, and resumed his work with the pious wish that, if he had suffered, his suffering might lead to the discovery and capture of the men who had treated him so shamefully.

It is hardly necessary to narrate what followed after that interview with the police inspector. How the car took him swiftly back to the station, how the telephone was jingled, and how every possible official within reasonable distance was informed of what had happened. The station-master at the station where Henri and his friends had boarded the train presently received a call.

"Yes, here, Inspector," he answered, politely enough, over the telephone. "You are there and you want me—well I am here, what then? Prisoners escaped from Ruhleben? Ah, yes, yes! I remember, the rascals escaped perhaps a week ago, and have not been heard of since. Have I seen them here? Pooh! If I had, you know as well as I do that I would have apprehended them. What's that you say? They have been to the station? You ask if I have seen three suspicious people—a man, perhaps an old man, in a dark-blue,

well-cut suit, wearing a Homberg hat and goggles, a girl, and a man of whose appearance you have no knowledge? Come now, that's a conundrum! I have seen many such people."

He began to get rather angry at the cross-examination of the police inspector—an examination, let us add, far less severe than that inflicted upon the manager of the sugar factory, but he listened awhile.

"You may have seen many such people," he heard over the telephone, "but all together, Herr Station-master—three all together—an oldish man, not big, perhaps bald, with goggles; a girl, and another man of uncertain appearance. Think now; not a very great number of people travel on the railway nowadays unless they are soldiers; think, have you not had such passengers?"

The station-master did think, think violently one may say, for it was well to be on the best terms possible with the police. A station-master might be a most important individual, very important indeed in his own estimation, but an inspector of the police in Germany was an important individual both in his own estimation, which was undoubted, and also in that of the public.

"Hold on one little moment; three people such as you describe—one an oldish man, a girl, and a third, a man with no description—have I seen such people getting on a train together? Why, wait!"

The scene as the aged and snappy old gentleman clambered aboard the train that morning suddenly occurred to the station-master, only to be put aside in an instant; for it seemed impossible that he could have been an impostor. The girl, too, looked so natural, so feminine, so absolutely genuine, and yet——

"Wait though, was it a girl?" the station-master asked himself, for it flashed across his stolid brain that the movements of the lady in question had not been, after all, entirely feminine. Now that he thought about the matter he remembered that at the moment when the three were boarding the train the lady had shown a most extraordinary degree of agility. She had clambered like a cat aboard the carriage, and had given a heave to the old gentlemen which disclosed a degree of strength somewhat peculiar in a woman. Yes, he was sure of it now, of course the thing was strange—it was not a woman, he felt sure.

"Hold!" he shouted down the telephone. "I have them!"

"You have them!" came the excited answer. "You have taken the three? You have got those prisoners?"

"No, no, no! I did not say I had taken them. I have got to the bottom of the mystery. Those three you mention boarded a train here this morning, a train going westward."

It was the turn of the inspector to shout down the telephone, to shout a peremptory order, to inform the station-master that he was coming immediately; and there followed at the station a close questioning of the station-master, followed by frantic telegrams and telephone messages which were sent down the line in pursuit of the train on which Jules and Henri and Stuart were travelling.

"Now we have them securely, thanks to my promptness and energy," said the police inspector, as he adjusted his glasses and pocketed his notebook—yes, pocketed his notebook, for that familiar object, part and parcel of every constable in Great Britain, is likewise an important part of the equipment of German policemen. It was with a flourish that the man pushed it into the short tail of his tunic, then he hitched his belt a trifle tighter, expanded his manly chest, and set his helmet at just the slightest rakish angle. He was a "dog" indeed, this police Inspector, wonderfully pleased with himself, bursting with self-importance, and as arrogant as they make them.

"You will see," he coughed, turning upon the station-master; "we shall have them, thanks to the telegrams I have sent. And then, my friend, what will they think of us at the central station? Of me, and this brilliant capture?"

"You!" exclaimed the station-master, somewhat taken aback; "of you, Inspector! But wait a moment. It is true that you have sent those telegrams off, and that, thanks to them, the runaways may be captured, but I——"

"May be captured?" thundered the inspector; "as if indeed they were not already in the hands of my subordinates. But proceed."

"I was about to add, to suggest, may I say? that, after all, in carrying out your duties you have been largely assisted by my promptness in remembering that three such persons as you described had actually boarded a train at this station. Consider for a little while: your description was, after all, not too elaborate—a little vague, absolutely deficient in the case of one of the fugitives. Is it not due in some small measure to my acumen that you are on the track of these people? Come now, Inspector, be fair. If there is honour to be won, apportion it out, and do not forget the assistance you have received from others."

It was curious that, at that very moment, there should arrive at the station, brought there in the police officer's car, which he had sent to the sugar factory for that purpose, the manager whose office Henri had so lately entered. The poor fellow was shaking with trepidation, with fear of what was to happen; and if his thoughts had been vague before, and not a little muddled, if terror of the law had somewhat disconcerted him, and upset his equilibrium during and after his cross-examination, terror of the future had made him now little more than a babbling idiot—an object, indeed, for the contemptuous glances of the police inspector and for his gibes and sallies.

"So," he said, standing over the portly figure of the little man, as he came from the motor-car and stumbled down the platform, "so, you have obeyed, Herr Winterborgen, you

are here to identify the three whose return in captivity we are waiting. That is good, and certainly you will be able to tell us that they are the individuals."

The manager held his hands up, expostulating weakly. There were tears in his eyes, tears of fear, of rage, and of anguish.

"But, identify them," he cried, almost shrieked indeed, "identify the three who purloined garments from my office? But no, it is impossible; for hear me, Inspector, I never saw those individuals; not once, to my knowledge, have I ever set eyes on them."

But if he expected pity or leniency, he might just as well have appealed to the wooden pillar which supported the roof of the platform. The huge police inspector was adamant, inflexible, unmoved, and surveyed the trembling figure of his victim with cold eyes which glinted cruelly. Very slowly, he slid one broad hand back into the short tail of his tunic, extricated his notebook with a flourish, and, opening it and producing a pencil, called upon the station-master to bear witness to the words uttered.

"Mark the words of this Herr Winterborgen," he said. "'Not to my knowledge,' he states, has he seen these three individuals; and yet, mark this again, he was able to describe their appearance fully, to describe the clothes they wore, their sex, and their possible destination."

By then the eyes of the manager were almost starting out of his head, and he was gaping and gasping with amazement at the story to which he listened. Never before, indeed, had he imagined that anyone—let alone a police inspector, a pillar of the law—could have invented such a story, could have produced such a lying fabrication. The words stunned his ears, and he felt more than ever that he was hopelessly involved in circumstances which would end in nothing less than his utter downfall. Nor did the hour which passed ere the train came to the station relieve him of his fears or make him any the happier. For even if the fugitives were captured—and it seemed more than likely that they would be brought to the station in the train then approaching—their coming could result in nothing but further embarrassment, for he would be expected to identify them definitely, and if he did that he well knew that difficulties would become greater.

"Ha! At last it is signalled, this train," said the police inspector, "and we shall soon know whether our friends have made this capture."

"Wait, though," the station-master cautioned him, coming from his office at that moment; "this is a special and does not stop, but behind it, only a few minutes intervening, there is another train, the ordinary train, which stopped at the station down the line to which your telegrams were forwarded, and where the fugitives will have been surrounded. Stand back there!"

The three of them—the station-master, the police inspector, and the trembling manager of the sugar factory—stood on the platform and watched the train as it ran through the

station at moderate speed; and then, thinking nothing more of it, waited for that other one, the smoke from the engine of which was already visible in the distance. Nor need we describe how the inspector—determined upon a capture, confident, indeed, that his telegrams had produced that result, and already bursting with triumph and rehearsing the terrible things that he would do to his captives—pounced upon the train, ran from carriage to carriage, and eagerly interrogated the officials. Imagine his rage, his mortification, his disappointment, when he was informed that no such people as the three whose description he had sent could be found upon the train going westward.

"Not search the train completely!" shouted an official whom he had questioned, and who, being of sufficient rank himself and of equal importance with the inspector, was not to be easily frightened. "How then? Is a police inspector the only individual capable of searching for spies and discovering them? Is everyone on the line a fool, then, unless he be a policeman? You'll tell us soon that we don't know our own business; as if, indeed, it were possible to miss three such people as you described, or even one of them, particularly when one knows that there were few passengers on the train in question."

It was of no use shouting back at the man; it was of no use engaging in a wordy quarrel with him; and of little service to take note of the covert smiles of the station-master and the sidelong winks he directed at the manager of the sugar factory—a manager now wonderfully transformed—the worthy Herr Winterborgen, who was even smiling. Slowly, little by little, arrogance oozed out of every pore of that perspiring police inspector, and presently he took himself off to his car and drove furiously away, wishing that he had never had this case to investigate, and that, wherever the escaping prisoners were, someone would shoot them.

Meanwhile, let us glance into one of the carriages of that train—that special which had bustled through the station while the inspector was waiting. In one of the compartments sat an aged man, with a Homberg hat of ridiculously small size pressed down over his temples, upon which wisps of hair shone whitely in the sunlight—a man who looked through big goggles at the scenery as it flashed by, and whose lips were hidden behind a drooping moustache of iron-grey colour. Beside him sat a girl, well-grown—masculine one would have almost said—with laughing features, a girl who had spread herself out in the carriage, and, lying back against the cushions, had placed her two feet on the opposite seat, a most inelegant, unladylike, yet possibly comfortable position. And beside them sat a big, bony, healthy individual, whose face was shaded by a broad hat, yet not sufficiently shaded to hide the wide grins which crossed it and denoted the utmost merriment. He was rubbing his two big, strong hands together, laughing, chuckling, and gazing every moment out of the window.

"My hat! My uncle! Crikey!" he exclaimed; "but that has really done it! And what luck we have had, too. To think that we should have been in a compartment which drew up near the signal station where that message about us was shouted by the man in charge. I declare again that you're a regular wizard, Henri, for how else could you have arranged for the train to halt just in that position, and where, thanks again to your knowledge of

German, it allowed you at once to hear and understand what was shouted. Let's have the words again."

The old and somewhat delicate-looking gentleman seated beside him turned upon the big man an expansive smile, a mischievous smile, and, pushing his goggles up on his forehead, burst into such a ripple of laughter that his drooping moustache, which seemed so natural, fell from its place, instantly transforming him. It was the jovial, yet cautious, Henri enjoying this amazing adventure to the utmost.

"My boy," he said, as he reached for the moustache and carefully adjusted it, "one moment while I take a glance at myself in the glass over the seat. That's better, ain't it? Quite straight, and makes me look the part to perfection. But what did that signalman shout, you ask? Well, rather an important message, and these are the words as I remember them: 'You'll stop at the station just beyond', he called to the driver; 'there are police there waiting for you, for there's information that there are three escaping prisoners from Ruhleben amongst the passengers, in disguise of course. Understand? Well, pull out and run through the tunnel.'"

It was little to be wondered at that the wits of the fugitives were at once set to work in lightning-like manner. If they were to escape, indeed, and were to avoid the police officials waiting for them at the station so near at hand, they must act instantly, must find some loophole, must alter their plans completely. Already the train was again in motion, for it had only pulled up for a few seconds, and, even while they were debating the matter, were looking at one another enquiringly, and were feeling already as if the case were hopeless, it ran into the tunnel. It was then that Henri gripped his two companions and spoke eagerly to them.

"Quick, to the end of the carriage," he said; "then hop out. It's dark, so that no one can see us. On no account must we be seen on the train when it has passed through the tunnel."

It was a fortunate thing for the trio that the train had been unable to get up any great speed since it got into motion again after leaving the signal station. It did little better than crawl into the tunnel, and, seeing that the station at which it was destined to halt, and where the police were waiting the fugitives, was only a short distance beyond, the driver made no effort to hurry. Thus it followed that the drop from the train was a matter of no great difficulty, particularly for such active individuals as Henri, Jules, and Stuart. Crouching between the wall of the tunnel and the passing train, they listened to it as it rumbled away in the distance towards a mere dot of light which disclosed the far end of the tunnel. Then that dot was of a sudden blotted out of sight, and the rumbling became louder.

"What's that?" demanded Stuart. "Not gone off the rails, I hope, for that will bring a pack of people into the place, and they'll find us."

"Another train has entered the tunnel, I think," came from Jules. "Listen, now, and look! You can see sparks coming from the funnel."

"Then, why not?" demanded Henri, in a voice which trembled with excitement. "Why not transfer ourselves to it? What matter if it is going in the opposite direction, so long as it throws our pursuers off the scent. Eh—what's the verdict?"

"That we snatch the goods the gods send us, and pile on to the new train."

That, too, was a matter of extreme simplicity to the three. Only, had the train been lighted, and had there been railway officials on it, they would have been staggered, no doubt, and vastly moved at witnessing the agility of these three unbidden passengers who now joined it. Indeed, the extraordinary and unexpected, if not masculine, agility of the lady would have simply and metaphorically floored any German official. But there was none to see, in the first place, because darkness flooded the scene; and, secondly, because no gaping official was on this special. Reaching a carriage and ensconcing themselves in a corner, Henri and his friends were presently whirled from the tunnel and swept on over the ground they had so recently covered, and in due course they ran through the station where the inspector, the station-master, and the unfortunate manager of the sugar factory were standing. Henri gave vent to an exclamation of astonishment, and then to a loud chuckle, while of a sudden he gripped his two friends by the arms and bade them lower their heads.

"It's all as clear as daylight now," he said. "I have been wondering how on earth these Germans discovered our whereabouts and our disguises; but that makes the whole matter perfectly transparent. The manager of the factory spotted the fact that his office had been entered, and that certain garments had been purloined. The police were called in, and then the station-master gave information of our arrival, and of our boarding the train. It's as clear as a pikestaff. Hurrah! How we've nonplussed them!"

"And if the hue and cry is all up the line, what happens to us?" asked Stuart, with a grim smile, some little time later, when the train had whirled them perhaps a couple of dozen miles onward. "We can't go on like this indefinitely. This train is bound to stop somewhere, and when it stops we are up against the same old difficulty again. Moreover, knowing our disguises, realizing that we have baffled them in some way, the police will be telegraphing all over the country, and may even guess that we are on this train. Common sense tells a fellow that the whole scheme must be pitched overboard and a new plan entered upon."

It was indeed a serious difficulty, for at any moment the train which carried them on so swiftly, so luxuriously one may say, might stop, and twenty or more gaping officials might investigate it. For all Henri and his chums knew, telegrams were already passing over the wires which flashed beside them as they ran through the country—telegrams warning officials, hungry for their capture, to be on the look-out, to be on the qui vive for three individuals—an oldish man in delicate health, his daughter, perhaps, and another, a big fellow, ostensibly an attendant. Yet, whatever plans they may have thought out, whatever

intentions they may have had, were suspended for a while, seeing that the train did not halt but ran on for quite a considerable time, indeed until dusk had fallen. Nor was it until darkness had fallen and the evening had passed that it finally ran into the outskirts of a large town, where presently the brakes gripped the wheels, setting them skidding over the metals, and soon bringing the carriages to a standstill. Then the train began to back, and presently was brought to rest in a siding.

"Out we go," said Henri. "No one has seen us up to date, and therefore all we can say is that we have still plenty of chances of escaping; we are no worse off than we were certainly, and perhaps we're better off. At any rate, speaking personally, I've still every intention of clearing out of Germany."

CHAPTER VII

A Friend in Need

"Half a mo'! What's that? Looks like a regular haystack," grunted Stuart, as he dropped from the train and stood in the fairway, one hand held out in front of him, and a ponderous finger pointing into the darkness.

"What's what? Oh, that!—that! Yes, it looks like a haystack," admitted Jules, following the direction of his indicating finger.

"On wheels! A hay-load on a truck," suggested Henri, peering into the gloom, and seeing the ghostly outline of twenty or more trucks which stood upon the rails in a siding quite close to them. "A truck of hay, Stuart—hay!"

"Or straw," growled the huge Englishman. "Well, what of it? What's it matter to us if it's straw or hay, or any sort of thing? What's anything matter, so long as it don't help us?"

He was in quite an irritable mood, and his voice sounded as though he were ready to quarrel with anyone on the smallest pretext. It was therefore with an exclamation of impatience that he realized that Henri, with quick impulsiveness, had gripped him by the arm and was shaking him eagerly.

"What's—what's up then?" he demanded peevishly; and then, looking in the direction in which the Frenchman was now pointing, grumbled loudly: "Still on about that hay or straw? You're wasting time, Henri."

"Idiot!" the impulsive Frenchman told him. "Haven't you heard of Germans hiding up in a hayrick—hiding as spies? It's a chance; let's take it. Get your knife ready."

When they had crossed the tracks and reached the line of trucks it was indeed to find that an opportunity for further escape was right before them. For here were half a dozen trucks stacked high with hay, and each covered with a tarpaulin. To cast off one end of the tarpaulin, to burrow a hole in the hay, to tread their way into the stacks, and to hack a space sufficient to accommodate their bodies was no great difficulty, and though, in the midst of their work, the train started, it made the job all the easier; for then, throwing discretion to the wind, they tossed what hay was superabundant overboard, and, having by that means obtained a cosy little nook in one of the stacks, put the tarpaulin back into position, and, sleepy now after their labours, and content that they were securely hidden, fell fast asleep, careless of the direction in which they might be travelling. And two days later, having in the meanwhile been lucky enough to obtain some food and water at a siding into which the trucks were shunted, they heard the brakes grind, and felt the train come to a gradual standstill.

"We shall have to get clear of this," said Henri. "Lucky it's night-time again. I wonder where we are?"

"Still in Germany, I suppose," said Stuart, as he peered from underneath the tarpaulin.

"No; Belgium," declared Jules of a sudden. "Look over there—it's—it's Louvain."

There, painted above the station building near which the trucks were halted, was the word, in large letters—Louvain.

"Louvain!" said Stuart, a bitter note in his voice; "where those brutes butchered the Belgians; where they burned the town and the library, and murdered women and children. Louvain! Just fancy! Still, it's Belgium, and that's nearer to England."

"And to France!" whispered Henri, a note of excitement in his voice—"and to France, Stuart! Let's get out and see what will happen."

Dropping from the truck, they presently found themselves in the streets of Louvain, with ruined and broken remnants of houses on either side of them, with a cowed population stepping sadly through the deserted streets, and with packs of arrogant German soldiers patrolling the town. In happier days both Jules and Henri had been at this place, had admired this Belgian city of learning, had known some of its professors—now dead or scattered, many of them having found a home in England—and had never imagined in those days that such a dreadful change could have been brought about in this once famous city of learning. Yet what changes had been wrought by the war which the Kaiser and his people had sought, and which had now deluged Europe!

What a tale of treachery and suffering; what a tale of furious fighting, of gallant deeds, of death, of victory, of wounds, had been wrought by those months of war which had elapsed since that eventful day when Henri and Jules discovered themselves in Berlin, the centre of a hissing, furious crowd, and were hurried to that camp of misery at Ruhleben!

He who ventures to give a full narrative of the deeds done during those months, of the varying fortunes of the combatants, of the warfare waged by land and sea and in the air, would needs have a task far, far beyond him, seeing that every day has been so full of incidents of surpassing importance to the world that a mere summary of them would be an undertaking. Yet to realize the situation, as it was at the moment when Henri and his two friends clambered from the truck in which they had escaped from the heart of Germany, and dropped to the ground in the heart of Louvain; to understand the changes which had occurred during those weary months of waiting at Ruhleben, it becomes a matter of necessity at this stage to glance, if only briefly, at the major events which had happened.

We have said already that, at the moment when Germany had thrown down the gauntlet to France and Russia, Belgium was at peace with the world, and Britain also. And the tale does not need to be repeated of how Germany, one of the Powers which had sworn to preserve the sanctity of Belgium, which had, indeed, signed a declaration to that effect and sealed it in the sight of others, now tore up that sacred treaty, and hurled her legions into Belgium. No need even to do more than remind the reader of how Belgian troops held up the advance of these treacherous foes, smote them severely, caused them terrible losses, and then, overwhelmed by numbers, were swept back, leaving the citizens in the hands of ruthless men, who murdered and butchered them, who perpetrated unmentionable horrors in the fair cities of King Albert, and burned thousands of houses and public buildings to the ground. Everyone must know, too, how that vile act of the Kaiser brought Great Britain into the conflict; how a British Expeditionary Force sailed promptly for France, and arrived in the neighbourhood of Mons only just in time to take its place beside the French armies then at death's grips with the main forces of the Kaiser's armies, who, having burst their way through Belgium, now invaded France. That historic retreat towards Paris, and the swaggering triumphal march of the Germans, were followed by a striking blow against the Teutons, who were driven back across the Marne, hurled out of central and northern France, till but a strip of the country remained to them.

Meanwhile thousands of British soldiers were flocking in, shoulder to shoulder, ready for the fray; while French forces were being mobilized. A line—thin enough in all conscience, desperately thin—was stretched from the eastern frontier of France across its northern provinces, to the very tip of Belgium at Ypres, and so across it to the sea. This line of men who burrowed their way in trenches—a force of less than one man to the yard—was yet a force of heroes. Unprepared though they were, unsupported, without a doubt because there were as yet no new armies to support them, without reliefs for the very same reason, and therefore dependent entirely upon themselves, they stemmed the German tide. Hopelessly outnumbered, they yet held their ground, and, though deluged by shells and faced by an enemy superbly equipped and prepared with the latest machinery of war, held him back, causing enormous losses in his ranks, and barring his way onward. The tale of the First Battle of Ypres is a tale of splendour, of heroic British action—the tale of how those few divisions—war-worn, hardened divisions by now—barred the road to Calais, and smashed the power of the Prussian Guards, troops hitherto considered invincible.

There is no need to recall those other battles, the almost daily exchange of shots along the trench-line, though for the information of our readers it may be just as well to enumerate some of the more important. From the sea, in the neighbourhood of Nieuport, the line of trenches ran in a southerly direction across the flats of Belgium and Flanders in front of Ypres, and down towards Arras. Thence, curling towards the east, and skirting the River Aisne and the famous city of Reims—where the vandals who had destroyed Louvain and many another city had long since wrecked the Cathedral, famous throughout the world—their line swept on over hill and dale, and hollow and furrow, across chalky plains and wooded heights and forest country to Verdun—that famous city which for centuries has been a stronghold. An ancient city, girdled at the outbreak of this gigantic war by a ring of fortresses of modern construction, in which a complete battery of guns was mounted; forts, let it be added, strategically placed, which could sweep the country in all directions. Then, turning sharply round Verdun, the line cut its way through muddy plains, through heights once more, through miles of country, till it reached the Swiss frontier. All along that line, fighting continued, here bursting out into a violent conflict, simmering down elsewhere, and at times subsiding altogether. Yet never were the trenches without a sinister line of crouching men, whether British, Belgian, or French, and ever was there another sinister, remorseless gang holding the German trenches opposite.

Round about the city of Reims there had raged at times most furious fighting. In the Vosges, French riflemen and Germans contended for the mastery without cessation; while in the Woevre, before St. Mihiel, at Arras, in a thousand places, were desperate conflicts, in which the line swayed, trenches were captured and recaptured, men died, and the Kaiser's troops frantically struggled to break their way through the cordon stretched before them. Along the British line the battle of Neuve Chapelle gave opportunity to many a young soldier, and proved to the Germans that British and Indians could fight heroically together. Then the Second Battle of Ypres took place, a conflict more furious than any that had gone before it, in which, making their preparations secretly, throwing to the winds all thoughts of humanity, acting in that ruthless, treacherous manner which one now associates as a natural course with the Germans, the Kaiser and his staff deluged the French and British lines—where they joined—with asphyxiating gas, which choked hundreds. And yet, in spite of this diabolical manoeuvre, in spite of the unpreparedness of the French and British, and though the Algerian troops of the French, scared by the gas as by the mutterings of a wizard, gave way and fell back, leaving a gap in the line, yet the enemy failed to gain their object. For the 1st Canadian Division flung itself across the gap and held on like heroes, fought with desperate bravery indeed, and wrought for the people of the British Empire, and for their brothers and sisters in Canada, a tale which, so long as the British nation exists, will never be forgotten—never beaten.

There is little to add to this tale of warfare on the Western Front. Failing in her shock tactics, and in spite of the treacherous use of gas, and occupied for the moment in strenuous and successful efforts to drive back the Russian hosts which had marched across Poland into Galicia, and even into eastern Prussia, Germany abstained from further efforts on the Western Front, hoping, no doubt, to carry out, even at the eleventh hour, the plan so

carefully formulated before the war commenced, upon which her future greatness was to be established. It has ever been the maxim of a great commander to divide his enemies, to split them into two parts, and drive them asunder; and, having placed them in that position, to hold the one firmly with as small a garrison as possible, and then, taking every man he could spare, to fling himself upon the other force and annihilate it. It is a common-sense procedure, for then there is opportunity to gather one's force together again, to take a second breath, and to repeat with the other half of the enemy force the same manoeuvre. The Germans are no wiser, no swifter, no better, indeed, than are our own or the French peoples. If they are superior in any sort of way it is certainly only in their craft and cunning, in their methodical and painstaking attention to detail, and in their ruthless disregard of all laws and customs when considering their own future. Thus, seeing that Russia and France are so widely separated, there was nothing extraordinarily deep in the plans of the Kaiser's Staff when it was proposed to crush France in the first few weeks of the war, to trample out her spirit, and then, having secured her in their toils, to race back to Russia, and, counting on the fact that she would still be in a state of hopeless confusion, to deal her such blows as would stun her. Yet, with all their cunning, with all their preparation, the Germans' plans had miscarried from the moment of their invasion of Belgium—which had seemed to promise such rewards that it was worth even the risk it foreshadowed of bringing Britain into the conflict. For the Belgians had thrown out the Kaiser's plans, had delayed the onrush of the Germans, had given France time to get her men together, and had allowed Britain to send a force to aid them. The blow failed; France, reeling under it, struggling beneath it, indeed, held her ground, recovered her strength, even advanced, and now, with Britain to aid her, formed a barrier to further progress. Not the heaviest blows, no amount of asphyxiating gas availed, even the hordes flung upon that line dashed themselves to pieces. It stood strong as ever, while Russia was rising in her strength and threatening Austria.

But the Tsar's forces were known to be short of arms and ammunition—facts reported by the German spies in Russia. Here was another chance. Why not reverse the proceeding, take advantage of Russia's shortage of ammunition, and smash her before she grew stronger, thus ridding Germany of a powerful enemy? Then, having in the meanwhile held the Western line with as thin a garrison as possible, and planted machine-guns at short intervals along it, the Teuton hosts could be gathered together, even the maimed put in amongst them, and a mighty force thrown again upon the Western line which should certainly crush it. That manoeuvre, so diligently thought out by the German Staff, was put into execution promptly; and, with massed guns, with a host of men, the Russian armies were assailed, and, thanks to their shortage of guns and ammunition, were driven backward, were forced to cross Poland, until they reached a line stretching from the Gulf of Riga to the Pinsk marshes, and so southward.

It was indeed an amazing advance on the part of Germany and Austria, and a great success; yet, at the same time, a great failure, seeing that it failed of achieving its one and only object, which was the crushing of the Tsar's forces. Not once had the Russian line been broken, not once had it been demoralized even; it was there, still in front of the

Germans and Austrians, undismayed, gathering strength daily, gathering guns and munitions, and all that it had suffered was loss of territory, and of numbers easily made good from the heart of Russia.

And still the Western line became stronger as the months went by, as Britain called her sons from every corner of the Globe, and as Kitchener's Army grew and grew in numbers. A foretaste of what might be expected was given to Germany when, in September, 1915, the French attacked in the Champagne area, and the British burst their way across the lines at Loos and Hulluch. Harassed by the knowledge that Russia was arming rapidly, and had millions of men to fill the gaps in her ranks, bewildered by the amazing and growing strength of the British, hemmed in by sea on almost every side, and seeing her own strength diminishing, Germany found herself in a situation little short of desperate. She must do something, and that quickly—something to smash these enemies. Already she had brought Turkey into the conflict on her side, and now she burst her way through Serbia with the aid of the treacherous Bulgarians. Yet it profited her nothing. For the real conflict and the real issue lay on the Western Front, where that line stretched through France and Belgium. It was there, and nowhere else, that the *coup de grâce* would be given to either of the combatants; and, clinging to the old idea as a drowning man clings to a straw—the idea of defeating their enemies in detail—the Kaiser and his Staff once more set to work to prepare a blow which should crush the French offensive and defensive, and break for themselves a way to Paris. Their eyes were fastened on Verdun, that point from which the long French line had pivoted during the great retreat at the commencement of the war, where grizzly cement forts circled the old town, a place famous for its strength, upon which the eyes of the world were likely to be attracted.

We have no space at this moment to tell of the many reasons for choosing Verdun for an attack—for doubtless there were many—yet the mention of one alone will be sufficient. The place was considered impregnable; its forts and guns had given to it a sinister reputation. Let German armies burst their way over the French lines at Verdun, and capture the ancient city and the fortresses, and the world would be impressed. Neutrals, although irritated by German frightfulness and overbearing action, on hearing of Verdun would shiver and cease to obstruct the Teuton. Let Roumania, tottering on the brink of war, but get the tidings, and she would no longer think of joining Britain and her allies. Add to these considerations the strategical value of a break of the French line at any point, with prisoners captured, and a huge wedge thrown into the gap, which would widen out so that the road to the sea would be barred no longer, and one sees sufficient reason for this new German plan which aimed at Verdun.

Even as Henri and Jules and the hefty Stuart tripped their way from the siding in Louvain, to which they had dropped from the truck which had brought them from the heart of Germany, the Kaiser's generals were in council before Verdun. Trains were hurrying troops in that direction, while under shelter of the trees—for the neighbourhood is generously wooded—guns of huge dimensions were already in position, and others more movable were being massed, till hundreds and hundreds were ready to pour shot and

shell upon the French defences. In every hollow, in every fold of the ground, under the trees, behind every sort of cover, German hosts were secretly collected, getting ready for that moment, now almost at hand, when the War Lord would launch his legions. In fact, Germany was to attempt on the Western Front, and against the French, precisely what she had attempted against the Russians with some degree of success, but yet without attaining her ambitions. She had aimed to crush Russia once for all, and, as we have said, had pushed the Tsar's legions back towards the heart of Russia. Yet the line of Muscovite soldiers was still unbroken, still undaunted, and still faced the soldiers of Germany and Austria. And on the west, Britain was getting stronger and stronger as the days went by, and becoming a greater menace. Yet, if the French could be smashed at any point, there might yet be time for the Kaiser's troops to defeat the British, when unsupported by their French ally, and afterwards to turn again towards Russia. The enormous prestige to be gained by the capture of Verdun would enhance Germany's chances, and a surprise attack might, and probably would, the Kaiser's General Staff considered, result in a triumph which would change Germany's fortunes.

But a few words with reference to Verdun itself, and we can return to Henri and his friends, now in Louvain. We have said already that the old city of Verdun, perched beside the River Meuse, in a gorgeously wooded country, and with the heights of the river-side lying between it and the enemy, was encircled by forts, which, prior to the war, gave to the city the reputation of impregnability. But the forts of Liége, in Belgium, had borne that selfsame reputation, and yet, when the Kaiser's forces treacherously invaded that country, and were held up at Liége, the huge guns prepared before-hand for this conflict shattered its forts—masses of steel and concrete—like so much paper, and later crushed the concrete defences of Maubeuge. Without a doubt, the same fate would be meted out to the forts at Verdun, were the French to rely upon them. But France is a nation of brilliant soldiers. Realizing at once that what was an impregnable fort in former days is now hardly better than an incubus—a mere house of cards, something utterly unreliable—she poured her forces out beyond those forts, dug her trenches on the eastern and northern slopes of the heights of the Meuse, and surrounded Verdun and its encircling forts with a network of trenches, covered by an artillery force, supplemented by guns which were at once removed from the forts. Indeed, she no longer relied upon Verdun as a fortress; it was merely one point in that long four hundred miles of trenches stretching across the country, no more vulnerable than any other point, and, one may add, no more impregnable. And down below those trenches, under cover of the woods, for weeks past, while Henri and his friends were languishing in Ruhleben, the Germans had been concentrating a mighty army, had been concentrating guns, equipment, and every other detail necessary for a gigantic attack, for the surprise offensive which they had planned to level at General Joffre and his forces.

"Louvain, and what next?" asked Henri aloud, as the three stepped gingerly along the pavements of the ruined city. "What next? How to get out of Belgium into France?"

"Or into England?" added Stuart.

"Or into Holland? That's where numbers of people manage to go when escaping the Germans," said Jules thoughtfully. "I've heard it said that there are Belgian patriots still in the cities of Belgium who make it their business to assist refugees. But that's where the difficulty comes in; how are we to meet such persons?"

There came a startled exclamation just at that moment, as the speaker cannoned into someone in the darkness—a small, broad figure of a man, who, rebounding from Jules, would have fallen but for the hand which that young fellow stretched out instantly. And perhaps it was just as natural that he should have apologized at once, and in the confusion of the moment in the French language.

"Pardon, monsieur," he said, whereat Henri's jaw dropped suddenly, while Stuart growled.

"And pardon me, monsieur," came the ready answer; "it was my fault. But—but—surely—surely, not German. You are—you——"

"One moment," said Henri, his wits hard at work; "who are you, monsieur?"

"I?—I? A Belgian patriot, monsieur; and you, though the darkness hides you, you are a Frenchman of Paris."

It was useless to dissemble longer, and, after all, there seemed little doubt but that the short, squat individual before them was certainly no German. Taking his courage, therefore, in both hands, Henri at once admitted that he and Jules were Frenchmen, and Stuart English.

"Monsieur," he said, "we throw ourselves upon your kindness. You are a Belgian patriot, you say, while we are refugees from Ruhleben. Assist us, help us to get away, for we are in the midst of enemies."

There was a short pause after that, while each one of the four peered hard into the darkness, the little man staring at Stuart's huge figure, and at the smaller proportions of Jules and Henri; while those three young fellows regarded the Belgian intently, indeed almost fearfully.

"Come this way, messieurs; follow me. Walk some ten paces behind me, and have no fear, for have I not said that I am a Belgian patriot? You wish to get to your own countries, eh? To fight this brutal Kaiser and his people? Bien! Follow, and I will lend you assistance."

CHAPTER VIII

The Verdun Salient

It was three nights after that on which Henri and his friends had reached Louvain—that deserted city wrecked by German violence—and had so fortunately and so literally hit up against a Belgian patriot, that four figures crept from a tenement which had escaped the general wreckage.

"You will walk along beside me, my friends, as though we were just inmates of the city," said the Belgian, just before they left the house in which he had given the three fugitives a resting-place. "If we pass German soldiers, take your hats off to them, and if they challenge, leave me to answer. Now let us be going, and I think that we may hope for success."

Those four figures, Henri and his friends, now dressed in rough civilian clothing, crept off along the deserted streets, and, threading their way through the outskirts of the ruined city, and passing on occasion groups of German soldiers whom they obsequiously saluted, at length reached the open country. Tramping on through the night, they sheltered, just before the dawn broke, in a ruined house in another city, and repeated a similar process on the following morning. It was on the third night that the Belgian led them into what had once been a peaceful country village, and which was now merely a mass of tumbled masonry.

"We are close to the Dutch frontier, my friends," he told them, "but the way there is not so easy as it might seem, for the Germans have stretched a barbed-wire fence between Belgium and Holland, and on it is suspended an electric wire, charged with a high voltage, which kills instantly; many a poor fellow endeavouring to escape from this unhappy country has been electrocuted. But there are ways to avoid such dangers, and here is one. Give a help, you, my friend Stuart, who are the Hercules of the party."

A huge grating, which he endeavoured to lift, was a mere plaything in the hands of the burly Englishman. It was a big grating above an open sewer, and heavy enough to try the strength even of Stuart, yet it yielded to the first tug he gave, and lifted upwards.

"Now, descend," said the Belgian, "there is a pit down here some twenty feet in depth, and iron rungs in the wall. Descend, my friends; I follow."

In a trice they were at the bottom of what felt like a deep, cold well, and were standing in utter darkness listening to the sounds made by the Belgian as he too entered and dropped the grid behind him. Then all four stood listening for a while.

"Not a sound; no one has followed—that is good," giggled the Belgian, for he was an amiable little fellow. "One has to be careful in these day, messieurs; for there are spies throughout Belgium, and they know well that there are people, like myself, patriots, my

friends, who carry on this traffic. But none have seen us, and therefore we are not likely to be disturbed. Now, on, messieurs, and have no fear, for there are no holes and gullies into which you can tumble, while, seeing that it has been dry weather, there is no water in the sewer."

Feeling their way by stretching out their hands, and stumbling along in the darkness, Henri following immediately after the Belgian, then Jules, and last of all Stuart, the party traversed a long stretch of the sewer, their fingers every second or so touching the brick walls on either side, while occasionally their feet splashed through puddles. Then the narrow path they trod swung to the left, and for a moment a breath of cold air blew in upon them, and, glancing overhead, Henri caught just a fleeting glimpse of stars far above, and of the iron bars of a grid stretching between him and the sky.

"Now to the left, messieurs, and we descend. Listen, we are nearly under the Dutch frontier, and overhead stretch those highly-charged electric wires which have been erected by the Germans, and on which many a poor fellow has been electrocuted. But even fear of electrocution cannot keep the brave sons of Belgium from endeavouring to leave this invaded country, and from joining those Belgian troops now fighting with the French and the British. No, I who lead you now have led hundreds of young fellows by this path or a similar one, and have taken them to safety. Now on, messieurs; in a little while we shall ascend to the surface."

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour later that Henri felt that the path under his feet was ascending, and presently, having in the meanwhile been half stifled, he began to appreciate the fact that fresh air was reaching him, and that he could breathe more easily. A warning cry from the man who led them now brought him to a halt, and five minutes later the whole party had clambered up the rungs of a ladder and had gained the Open.

"Messieurs," said the Belgian, "beyond there, straight ahead, you will find a town with friendly Dutchmen in it, who will feed you and clothe you and send you to your people. Adieu! You will fight all the better for these adventures, and all the more fiercely for having seen what poor Belgium is like under the Germans. Adieu! And good luck go with you."

Shaking hands with their deliverer, and thanking him most cordially, Henri and Jules and Stuart saw him depart down the ladder, and then turned their faces from unhappy Belgium into Holland. For, indeed, they were now beyond the frontier, and, looking back, could see the barbed-wire fence which separated Holland and Belgium, erected to keep patriotic sons of the invaded country from escaping German control and joining the Belgian forces under King Albert. Yes, they could see the light shot from a small moon, which had now risen, shining on the wires, shining on that lower one which was charged with an electric current.

"Nasty thing to get up against, that," said Stuart, the big, hefty Stuart, shuddering in spite of himself. "I expect many a poor devil has been killed by that method. And what a

method! Just the sort of thing a German would do. Now isn't it a mean, underhand way of killing people? But never mind, here are three of us who mean to get even with them; and in the meanwhile what about getting forward? What about something to eat? What about something to smoke? What about joining people who ain't afraid of smiling, who've pot a friendly feeling for British and French, and don't give a rap for the Germans?"

The warmest of welcomes indeed waited the three in that Dutch town which they were approaching, and despite the late hour of their arrival they were immediately accommodated in one of the houses, were given an opportunity of bathing, and were provided with suitable clothing and with a meal the like of which they had not seen for many a long day.

"And now," said Henri on the following morning, when they assembled in the *salon* of the house to which they had been invited, "and now, Stuart, what happens? Naturally enough, Jules and I make for France by the quickest route, and then join the army."

"Which looks to me as though you're suggesting that I'm going to do something quite different," growled Stuart, looking impressively big in the Dutch clothes which had been provided for him. "Just as naturally enough as you two are going to join the French army, I am off to join the British—Kitchener's, you know—to take a hand in the job of smashing the Kaiser."

"Then we shall part," said Jules, not without a sigh of regret. "We have had fine times together—eh, Stuart? And, looking back upon it, even Ruhleben doesn't seem so bad. In any case, it was worth it to have gone through such a long adventure as we have had together. But I wish we could continue in one another's company. I wish somehow you, too, could join the French army, or that our regiments in the French and British armies might be set to fight side by side in Flanders."

"The next thing is how are we going to return?" said Henri. "I have said that we shall take the quickest route, and I am not quite sure that that won't be via London—eh, Stuart? What do you think? Coastal services from Holland towards France, I expect, are disorganized, and no longer possible."

That this was so, their host immediately informed them.

"You may take it from me," he said, "that it is no longer easy, and in fact almost impossible, to obtain a steamer running between the Hook and Havre as formerly, and indeed of late it has been a matter of considerable difficulty to get a passage from Holland even to England; for the German submarines infest these waters, and, careless whether the boat belong to a neutral or to one of the combatants, utterly indifferent to the fact that many of them are filled with women and children and people who have nothing to do with the fighting, indeed forgetful of all instincts of humanity, of all mercy, and of all the usual customs and feelings which have in the past controlled the actions of belligerents, are torpedoing vessels at sight without warning, killing the crews and passengers, murdering

both French and British and Belgians, as well as Dutchmen and people of other nationalities. Mon Dieu! they are beasts these Germans. They are cowardly bullies. That Kaiser will surely rue the day that he ever commenced this war, and will most certainly regret the frightfulness which he has taught his subjects to show to the people of all nations."

"And so there is a difficulty about getting a boat to England—eh?" said Henri, a little concerned. "But surely it should be possible. Perhaps some English boat would take us; for I can hardly believe that they have been scared from the water."

"Scared! Ha ha!" laughed the Dutchman. "No, no! The picture I have painted is perhaps a little over-coloured. Though the menace of the German submarines has been extreme, and though they have murdered numerous individuals, and have sunk a number of vessels, yet they have not gone scot-free themselves; understand that, messieurs. German submarines have been trapped, have been sunk, have suffered themselves to such an extent that it is said that there are scarcely crews left to man them; only, just now, there is a recrudescence of the peril. There are more of these boats about, and consequently there is more difficulty in crossing to England."

Yet the impatience of Henri, Jules, and Stuart to rejoin their own people was so great that no amount of danger could thwart them. A visit to their respective consuls provided them with funds for the journey, and the following morning they were on the sea and steaming for England.

"'Pon my word, I can hardly believe it's true," chortled Stuart, now clothed in different raiment, and looking indeed a very fine and sturdy, if not respectably-dressed, member of the British nation. "It's too good to be true; and I am sure I shall wake up to-night imagining that I am still on board that train, or in the lodgings that Belgian patriot provided us with, and in any case being chased by Germans. Germans! Just you wait till I get a turn at 'em."

No wonder that Henri grinned at his huge companion; it delighted him to hear the sturdy remarks of this gallant fellow, just as it delighted Stuart to look down from his greater height at the dapper, spruce, active, and now well-clad figures of his two most dashing French comrades. Spruce, indeed, Henri looked, his little moustache lending a certain amount of distinction to his face, his head held well on his shoulders, his cigarette between his lips, and the most jaunty air about him. There was a far-away look, however, in Henri's eyes, for he was thinking of France—thinking of her as she was now, and as she had been when he last saw his native country.

"Mon Dieu! What a change! What desperate changes!" he was saying to himself. "Every man able to bear arms, and of a suitable age, a soldier; every one of them living the life followed by our ancestors—those cave-men—dwelling in trenches throughout the months, fighting like tigers to beat down the Germans. Well, it will be good to join them, good to wear a uniform and line up shoulder to shoulder with our fellows."

"Yes, good," Jules admitted—for Henri's last remark had been uttered aloud—his face flushing at the thought. "What'll they do with us, Henri? Send us to some instruction-camp, do you think, and keep us there fooling about, training, drilling, doing things that I hate—that we all hate?"

"Poof! Not they. You seem to forget, Jules, that you and I have done our training; and, although we may not be very skilful soldiers, we can both of us shoot, know our drill sufficiently well, and if put to it can dig with the best of them. No, I'm hopeful that we shall jump out of these clothes into uniform, and shall almost as promptly jump into the trenches and find ourselves engaged in fighting the enemy."

It was with real regret that the two Frenchmen parted with their English companion on arrival in London.

"Of course, we'll all of us make the same sort of promises," laughed Stuart, as he gripped their hands at parting. "We'll swear to look one another up, to meet again shortly, and possibly, if we are rash, to write to one another; and just as certainly we shall find it awfully hard to meet, and, in fact, are more likely to knock across each other by pure accident than by design. It's always like that in warfare, and more than ever now in this conflict. Well, an revoir! That's the word, isn't it, Henri? Au revoir! Here's wishing that we may meet again soon; and, better than all, hoping that we shall rapidly whop the Germans. Au revoir! We have had splendid times together."

They had had a wonderful adventure indeed, and that escape from Germany was one which, almost at once, gave interest of quite considerable degree to the public, both British and French. For journalists ferreted out the fact that Jules and Henri were fresh from Germany, and though the two young fellows were modest enough they did not hesitate to tell their story. Thus, as they sat in the express train which took them to the sea-coast on the following day, they read a full account of their own doings. A few hours later they were in Paris, and at once reported at the Ministry of War.

"Bravo! So you are back from Ruhleben, mes enfants. Welcome, welcome!" cried the officer who interviewed them. "And now, of course, like good sons of France, you have returned at once, at the very earliest moment indeed, to fight France's enemies—the Boche, the Hun, the despicable ruffian whom the Kaiser and his war lords have sent in our direction to wreck the country. Now, tell me; you have had some training?"

"Yes, mon Colonel, we have both done our course, and were on holiday in Germany when war broke out and prevented us from returning. We are very anxious, mon Colonel, to join in the fighting."

The old Colonel's eyes sparkled as he listened to Henri's rejoinder, and, with Gallic enthusiasm, he smacked both young fellows heartily on the back.

"Bon! It is fine to hear you, mes enfants. It is grand to know that two of France's sons have gone through such adventures in order to return to the country. And you wish to join in the fighting as soon as possible? Bien! If I can contrive to arrange it, it shall be so. But, first of all, you must go to an instruction-camp, from which you will be drafted to regiments, and where, of course, your uniform will be issued, as well as your kit. Au revoir! Good luck go with you!"

It was a case of incessant movement for Henri and Jules, and, indeed, for weeks now they seemed to have been travelling; first those few miles on foot in the neighbourhood of the camp at Ruhleben, and then in the empty passenger train which had conveyed them from that dangerous area. Later came their trip on the supply train, and here, once more, they were packed in a French supply train running out of Paris en route for one of the big army camps instituted by the French. By the following morning, in fact, they had discarded plain clothes, and were looking critically at one another in uniform.

Jules gave vent to a light whistle, indicative of surprise, astonishment, and amusement —if, indeed, a whistle can indicate the latter. Certainly it was not one which displayed any sort of tendency to admiration; while the grin which followed it made Henri quite sure that his appearance was a source almost of ridicule to his comrade.

"What's wrong?" he demanded rather shortly. For when you criticized Henri's get-up— the cut of his coat and of his trousers, and in particular the hang of the latter, the colour of his socks, and his particular fancy in boots and hats—he was apt to become quite angry. And it made no difference now that the smart clothes which he was wont to wear had been changed for the peculiar blue uniform of France's fighting forces, supported by a pair of army boots of sturdy pattern, and capped by a steel helmet of distinctive style and of the same peculiar blue colour. Yet, withal, putting cut aside, allowing the fact that Henri, dressed as he was now, looked tall and strong and active and upright, and quite martial too, armed with a rifle, one had to admit that there was a huge difference between the Henri of that moment and the dapper, elegant, well-groomed Henri of twenty months before—a Henri who in London or Paris might quite fairly have been termed a "knut".

"Well, you do look a 'one-er'!"

"And what about you?" demanded Henri a little warmly. "Now that compliments are flying, what about you, mon ami? With that pack on your back you look like a donkey laden for the market."

At that Jules grimaced, and jerked his pack higher; and, indeed, Henri had not described him altogether unfairly. For your French *poilu*—the gallant, sturdy French infantry soldier—is, when on the line of march, if not actually overloaded, certainly apt to have the appearance of being so. What with his pack, his mess tins, the camp-kettle which one man among a certain number carries, his entrenching-tools, and the little bundle of faggots for the camp-fire, a French infantryman does indeed seem to have a vast quantity of personal impedimenta.

A sounding bugle called the two, and in a little while they were parading with a number of other men, some of whom had already seen service, while others were new to warfare altogether—men who possibly had been delayed from joining the colours by illness, who had contrived to reach France from abroad, or who belonged to a younger classification. A smart sergeant threw a knowing eye along the line, and, striding down it, seemed to take in the appearance of every man within a few seconds. Halting here for a moment to adjust a belt, and there to tuck in the tag of a buckle, he soon reached the end of the line, and, passing down behind it, adjusting packs, putting kettles in the correct position, arranging helmets at the regulation angle, he presently appeared in front again, and treated the squad to a smile of commendation.

"Very good indeed, lads. Very good," he said. "Stand easy for a moment."

Striding across the ground came a dapper officer—one of those smart, tall, well-turned-out Frenchmen, who appear to be the essence of soldierly composure. Halting in front of the squad, which was drawn up at attention once more, he, too, ran his eye over the men, passed a remark to the Sergeant which was essentially complimentary, and then advanced a few paces nearer.

"Mes enfants," he said, "there are some among you, who are but new recruits, who may have done your musketry course already, who doubtless know something of soldiering, and yet who must needs undergo further training; to you my remarks do not apply. But there are others among you who have seen service, who have engaged the Boche, and who may doubtless desire to return to the front at the earliest moment. Let such men step a pace forward."

Henri did not even glance at Jules, seeing that, being on parade, he must keep his eyes directly forward; while Jules, some files to his left, did not dare to cast a look in Henri's direction. It was strange, therefore, and yet not strange, when one remembers the spirit which animated these two young fellows, that, without agreement, without waiting to see what the other would do, each instantly took a pace forward, and with them perhaps a dozen of their comrades.

"Bien! Very good! And now we will ask you all about it," said the officer, smiling pleasantly. "Mon camarade, you who look so strong, tell us of your experience."

He halted in front of a broad-shouldered, burly man, who was well past thirty-five years of age, and whose chin was deeply scarred by a wound, now healed completely.

"What experience, mon Capitaine?" the gallant fellow repeated. "Well, at Ypres, in 1915, and before that, at Charleroi, in the great retreat past Château Thierry, and so to the south of the Grand Morin."

"And afterwards, mon ami?" asked the officer, patting him in paternal manner on the shoulder; for, though discipline is strict in the French army, indeed stricter in no other,

there is yet the best of feeling between officers and men, a species of *camaraderie* which unites them closely. "You have seen much service, my friend. What then, after the Grand Morin?"

"What, then? Mon Dieu! There was the Battle of the Marne, mon Capitaine, when we drove the Boche before us; and there followed the fight about the Aisne, when the British were just to the left of us; and, later, yes later, for I have seen a great deal, mon Capitaine, there was fighting near Arras, fighting to the north of the line later, between Ypres and Nieuport, when the Germans assailed the British at Ypres, and lost the flower of their Prussian Guard Corps. This is the full tale, monsieur, for I have already mentioned the Second Battle of Ypres, in which those Huns first nearly stifled me with asphyxiating gas, and then took this chip out of my chin with a bullet."

"And you would repay that same chip, my friend?", laughed the officer.

"Bien! You may say that, Monsieur le Capitaine—repay it a hundredfold if I am able."

From one to another the officer passed, questioning them in the same friendly manner, inviting their confidence, listening to their stories, extolling their actions with words which reached the ears of their comrades.

"And you," he said at last, arriving at the gallant Henri, and tapping him on the breast with a friendly finger, while he ran his eye over this young soldier, admiring his clean, well-bred, active appearance, the set of his figure, his healthy looks, and the perky little moustache which Henri still boasted. "Well, you," he asked, "mon enfant?"

"I, mon Capitaine? Well, I have seen but little more than the heart of Ruhleben camp," Henri told him; "for I was there, a prisoner for many weary months."

"And then, did our friend, the Hun, think so little of you that he set you free?" asked the officer, his eyes twinkling. "Hardly that, I am sure, my friend, for you look as though you could do some fighting."

Henri smiled back at him.

"No, Monsieur le Capitaine," he told him; "it was not because they wished to set me free that I am here, but because they couldn't help it. I escaped—I and two other comrades, one of whom was British."

"Ah! And you escaped—you and two comrades, one of whom was British; and because you wished—all of you, no doubt—to fight for your country?"

"That is so," Henri admitted at once. "We were eager to fight the Hun, and we have joined the French army at the first opportunity."

It was the same when the officer questioned Jules, and in a trice he realized that the two had made their escape from Ruhleben together.

"Tiens!" he cried; "one little moment. Two young Frenchmen who escaped from Germany and an Englishman with them—mais oui! but—vraiment! I have read this same story quite lately. Ah! I have it. You, then, are Henri and Jules for certain?"

The two young soldiers admitted the fact with rising colour, while the glances of every man in the squad were cast at them, and the Sergeant, that smart little fellow who had first dressed the line and adjusted every buckle and every accoutrement, turned a pair of admiring eyes on them. As for the officer, he gripped each one by the hand and shook it warmly.

"It's an example to us all, mes enfants," he told the squad. "There is great honour to our big friend here who has seen such fighting throughout the first days of the war, the Retreat, that Battle of the Marne where we smashed the crowing German, the conflict near Arras and round Ypres, which barred the progress of our enemy. To such a man there is undying honour. But here we have two who, though wretched, no doubt, while confined in a German prison, half-starved, by all accounts, bullied and browbeaten, could yet have remained in that camp safe from the danger of warfare. But they wished to help their country; and see them here, joining up with our forces at the very first moment. And so, Jules and Henri, you would wish to go to the front almost immediately?"

The two nodded their assent.

"And you have had training?"

"Pardon, monsieur," said the Sergeant, opening a book and placing his finger on the name first of Henri and then of Jules; "here is their record. Three years ago they did their training and attended manoeuvres, and were reported on as excellent conscripts. In the ordinary way they would attend a few drills here, perhaps go through a short instruction in musketry and bayonet exercises, and then be drafted to the front."

"Bien! There is little else after that for them to learn but bombing and the warfare peculiar to trench fighting—such as the conduct of trench-mortars, catapults, and other weapons of a similar description—that they can well learn at the schools of instruction just behind the front. Pass them for the front, Sergeant. Put them down to go with a new draft which leaves for Verdun to-morrow evening. Good luck, my friends! I wish, indeed, that I could come with you."

"Re-form line!" bellowed the Sergeant, or, rather, he snapped the order, and at his words those who had stood forward a pace stepped back just as smartly, while every head turned as the men dressed the line.

"Dismiss!" bellowed the Sergeant, and in a moment the squad broke up, each man going off to his own quarters. As for Henri and Jules, they spent some busy hours in making ready for the coming journey; and, boarding the train with a draft of men the following evening, they found themselves behind the Verdun lines after a longish journey.

They were near the spot selected by the "All Highest", by the Kaiser, the would-be lord of the world, who had determined to make one more gigantic effort to crush the French and to defeat his enemies.

CHAPTER IX

A Terrific Bombardment

There is no need to tell how Henri and Jules, now converted into *poilus*, joined the troops in their billets behind the lines at Verdun; how they went to a school of instruction, where they were coached in the minute and delicate, if not peculiar, art of bombing; how they learnt, in fact, to conduct trench warfare, and prepared for closer contact with the enemy. Nor need we tell how presently they were drafted into the city of Verdun, where it lies beside the River Meuse in a sleepy hollow facing the heights beyond, which lay between it and the Germans. After a residence there in billets, they crossed the river, and, mounting those heights, gained at length the communication-trenches which gave access to the French positions in the neighbourhood of Hautmont.

"And how do you like it?" the Sergeant in command of the platoon to which they were attached asked them as the dawn broke on the following morning, and every man in the trench stood to his arms in case of an attack by the enemy. "See you, Jules, and you too, Henri,"—for let us explain that our two young heroes were not entirely unknown to their comrades, that is unknown by name or by reputation; indeed, the regiment to which they were now attached had, like many another regiment, read of their exciting escape from Ruhleben, gloried in the event and in the spirit it showed, and were ready to welcome them heartily—"you two, Henri and Jules, here is a loophole for each of you. You see the parapet of the trench is strengthened with logs cut from the forest, and if you are careful not to poke your heads up above the parapet you have little to fear from enemy bullets. Look away down below you; the ground slopes gradually, and there is nothing to obstruct your fire but the stumps of trees which were cut down months ago. Now, look still farther, and I will tell you something of the position: there, to the left of you, is Brabant, just round the corner of the hill, though you can't quite see it, and to the left of that again, the river, with the village of Forges just across the water, and Bethincourt and the Mort Homme Hill close to it. Now look to your right. There's Gremilly lying near the railway,

and farther along still, beyond Ormes, is Cincery, and south of it Etain, while immediately beyond are the heights of Douaumont, with Vaux closely adjacent."

Peering through their loopholes, Jules and Henri spent a useful and interesting half-hour in watching the scene before them. They were standing in a trench dug across the gentle slope of a hill which at one time, in those days of peace preceding the war, had been thickly clad with fir-trees—a slope now denuded altogether, and presenting only innumerable stumps, standing up like so many sentinels, while those nearer to the trenches had barbed wire stretched between them, making a metal mesh which would require most strenuous efforts to break. Not a soul was to be seen in front of them; not a figure flitted through the woods in the direction of the Germans' position, while as for the Boche, there was not one in evidence, though during that half-hour they detected the line which indicated the enemy trenches, and heard more than once the snap of a rifle.

"And it is ever thus, Henri and Jules," the Sergeant told them. "We stand to arms in the early morning, just as now, waiting for the attack which, it is whispered, will be made upon us, and which never comes. Indeed, to me it seems that the Germans have for days past given up all idea of an advance in this direction; and sometimes not even a rifle is fired, while the cannon is never heard."

If no one was to be seen in front of the French fire-trenches; or in front of the cunning pits where machine-guns were hidden, there was yet ample movement, and plenty of people, close at hand to drive ennui from the minds of Henri and his comrade. There were soldiers everywhere along the trench—merry fellows, who sat about the fire—for in this month of February the early mornings were very chilly—who smoked their pipes and laughed and chatted, and who watched as breakfast was made ready. There were men carefully attending to trench-mortars, others polishing their rifles, and yet others again who had crept by deep tunnels to the cunning positions in front and were busily attending their machine-guns; and behind, along the communication-trenches, in the support and reserve trenches, in a hundred and more dug-outs, there were more *poilus* with officers amongst them, hearty, confident individuals, living a curious existence, which had now lasted so many months that it seemed to have been their life from the very commencement. Farther beyond still, it was impossible to see, for Henri and Jules had their duties and might not leave the regiment; yet in hundreds of hollows there was hidden the deadly French soixante-quinze—the 75-millimetre quick-firing gun, which from the commencement of this gigantic conflict has controlled and beaten German guns of a similar calibre. Yet again, behind them, were other bigger guns, splendidly dug in and hidden cleverly with straw-thatched roofs, many of them no doubt once filling the embrasures of Douaumont and other forts which in times of yore had gained for Verdun the reputation of impregnability. Yet German leviathan guns had proved that they could now smash Douaumont or any other fortress to pieces within a few hours, whereas in the old times it had been a matter of days, when even the artillery was sufficiently powerful. Modern invention, high explosives, and scientific artillery had altered modes of defence, and the fort at Douaumont and the forts elsewhere encircling the sleepy town of Verdun

were now but shells of masonry, mere billets for soldiers, while the guns were ranged out in the open.

What a busy scene it was behind the fire-trenches in which Henri and Jules were now standing. In a hundred cunning little nooks, in corners which one hardly expected to come upon, there were field-kitchens, where a fire might be kindled without attracting the enemy or his artillery-fire, and where soup—beloved of the *poilu*—might be prepared for those on duty.

"Mon ami, it's a good thing to have warmth both without and within," said, the Sergeant who had already befriended our two heroes, beating his hands together to promote the circulation, and blowing upon his fingertips, for it was a chilly day this late February, 1916. "A man who is cold faces the enemy and the dangers attendant upon this sort of business with a courage which is perhaps a trifle damped, while if he be hungry also, and cold within, then indeed he is at a disadvantage. Come, a bowl of soup! Our cook is a specialist in its manufacture, and, myself, I think that the fellow is good enough to be chef even at the Astoria in Paris. You know the Astoria, my Jules?"

Jules treated the Sergeant to one of those amiable smiles of his. Did he know the Astoria Hotel? That aristocratic establishment in Paris. Were there many aristocratic parts of that famous city of which he was ignorant? It made Henri snigger indeed, remembering those days, now it seemed so long ago, when he and Jules had been among the elegants of the city. Yet, if these two young soldiers had known what luxury meant, and what it was to lead a life of gaiety, they were none the less good soldiers of France, destined to prove themselves, indeed, as noble as any of those comrades about them. Seated there on the fire-bench, where a man could stand and level his rifle in the direction of the enemy, they and the Sergeant sipped their bowls of soup with relish, dipping a crust of bread into it, and wanting nothing better. The outdoor life, their unusual surroundings—which had not yet become so familiar to them as to go without observation—the keen February air, the sense of danger impending, lent zest to appetites already healthy.

"I'd as soon dine like this as anywhere," said Henri, as he tipped his bowl up and his head back at the same time, and imbibed the steaming beverage. "Just fancy sitting down to a five- or six-course meal, as a fellow was accustomed to do in the days before this war commenced. A five-course meal, Jules! Fancy what we'd have said to such a thing in Ruhleben, where the meals were hardly recognizable."

Jules at that moment was engaged in finishing a huge crust of bread, and, holding the remains of it up between fingers and thumb, and balancing his bowl of soup neatly in the other hand, was in the act of drinking from it, when a distant thud, a screaming sound, and then a terrific concussion close at hand sent his bowl flying, and the young soldier himself rolling from the bank upon which he had been seated. As for Henri, when Jules caught a view of what was left of that young fellow it was to discover his friend half buried in earth, a huge log lying right across his body, and the Sergeant, tumbled, inert and lifeless it seemed, over the log. Then willing hands came to their rescue, and within a moment or

two all three were again seated on the bank, the Sergeant holding his head between his hands, still dizzy after that explosion, while Henri was carelessly brushing the dirt from his clothing.

"A TERRIFIC CONCUSSION SENT HIS BOWL FLYING AND THE YOUNG SOLDIER HIMSELF ROLLING FROM THE BANK"

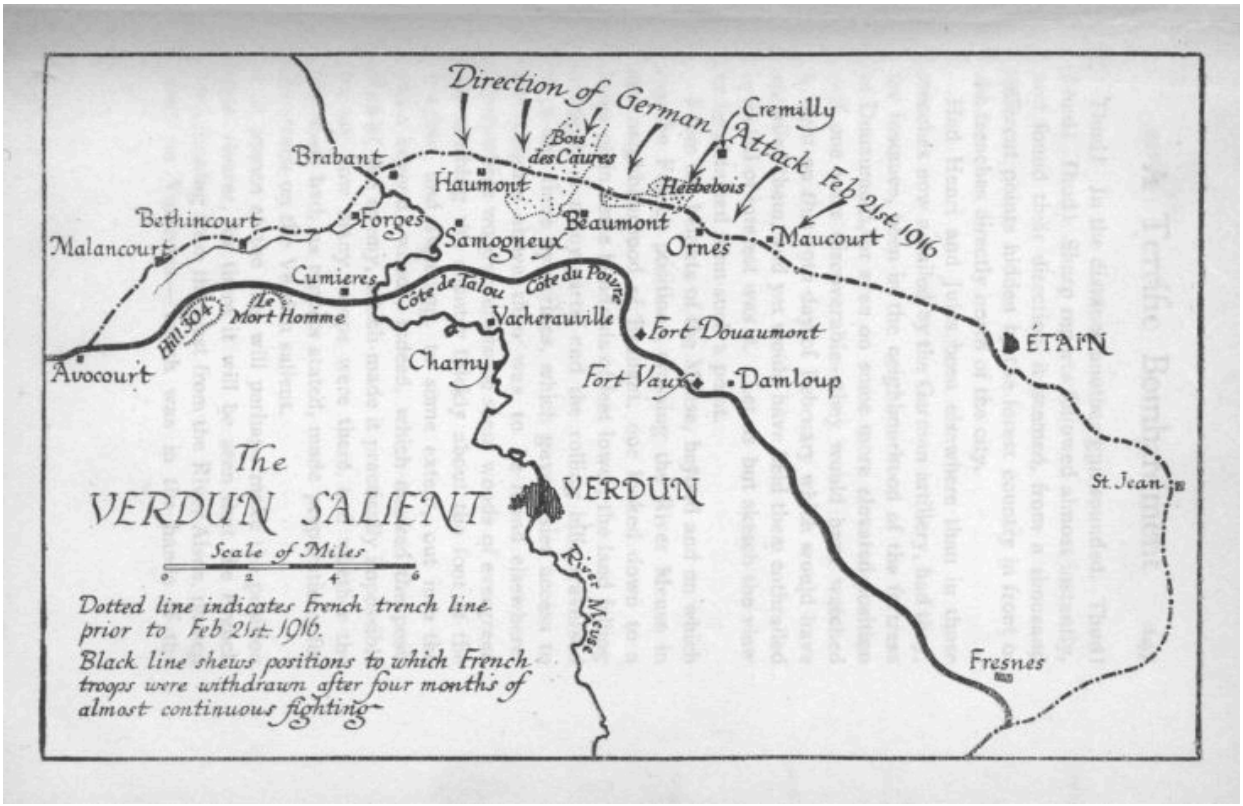
"A TERRIFIC CONCUSSION SENT HIS BOWL FLYING AND THE YOUNG SOLDIER HIMSELF ROLLING FROM THE BANK"

"A near squeak, mon ami," laughed one of the *poilus*, as he assisted Henri in his task; "that is the first shell that has come near us for days past, and I shouldn't mind if it were the last of them. Understand, my comrade, that shell-fire is not all very pleasant, and there are times when a man must sit in the fire-trench, crouching at the bottom, whilst they rain all round him, some bursting in the trench and shattering the traverses, some thumping pits behind or in front big enough for a platoon to camp in, and others blowing in the parapets,

and smothering the fellows behind them. Rifle-fire is nothing to it—a mere pastime—for then, if a man keeps his head well down, there is but little danger."

Thud! In the distance another gun sounded. Thud! Thud! Thud! Sharp reports followed almost instantly, and found their direction, it seemed, from a thousand different points hidden by the forest country in front of the trenches directly north of the city.

Had Henri and Jules been elsewhere than in those trenches now assailed by the German artillery, had they, for instance, been in the neighbourhood of the fortress of Douaumont, or even on some more elevated position—if one were discoverable—they would have watched a sight on this 19th day of February which would have appalled them, and yet would have held them enthralled—so full of interest was it. Let us but sketch the view to be obtained from such a point.



MAP OF VERDUN SALIENT DURING OPERATIONS ON 21ST FEBRUARY, 1916

From the heights of the Meuse, beyond and on which lay the French positions, crossing the River Meuse in the neighbourhood of Brabant, one looked down to a huge plain some hundreds of feet lower, the land falling abruptly in many parts, and the rolling hills traversed here and there by ravines, which gave easier access to the heights above than was to be found elsewhere. Everywhere woods were to be seen, woods of evergreen firs clothing the country thickly about the foot of the heights, and sweeping, to some extent, out into the plain beyond; woods, indeed, which masked the position of the enemy,

which made it practically impossible to say how many troops were there, and whether the Germans had, as reports stated, made preparations for an attack on the Verdun salient.

A glance at the map will perhaps make the position even clearer, for there it will be seen that the French line, running from the west from the River Aisne, passed close to Varennes—which was in the hands of the enemy—struck north at Avocourt, skirting the foot of hilly ground, and so continuing to Malancourt. From there the trench-line ran due east to Forges, just north of the brook of that name, and, crossing the River Meuse a little north of the point where the brook Forges falls into the river, ran north and east via Brabant, and along the line already indicated, sweeping from Etain and St. Jean—its most easterly point—due south till it reached the neighbourhood of Fresnes, and then curving towards the west and south, where it again approached the river. St. Jean, the most easterly point of the line, may be said to have formed almost the apex of the salient made by the French trenches encircling Verdun, and the city of that name may be said for the purpose of our description to have filled a point along a line drawn across the base of the salient. Perhaps thirty miles in length, this line, represented by the River Meuse, presented numerous roads and crossings by means of which French troops could be marched to any point of the salient, and presented also at Brabant, to the north of it, and at its southernmost point, positions of much importance. Let us suppose for a moment that an overwhelming enemy force was disposed in the neighbourhood of Brabant, and another at the southernmost point of the base of the Verdun salient—where the French trenches again ran adjacent to the river—a blow driving in the French defences both north and south at the self-same moment would shorten that base to which we have referred, and would, as it were, narrow the neck of the salient dangerously; it would have the effect, indeed, of tying up the force of men holding the apex of the salient, and of limiting their means of retreat if that were necessary, and the power of reinforcing them rapidly from Verdun. It may be, indeed, that this plan was in the minds of the Germans when, on the 19th of the month in question, they commenced that bombardment the first shot of which had proved so nearly disastrous to Henri and his comrades, and which, commencing at that moment, played on the whole Verdun salient for two days and nights. Then on the 21st they opened their campaign against the city of Verdun and the Verdun salient with a mighty blow against the northern trenches, close to Brabant, where the French lines crossed the river, and in the course of a few hours opened the eyes of the French command—which, though well aware of an impending attack, was perhaps not fully informed as to the scale and significance of the German preparations. Indeed, in those first few hours of the bombardment of the northern sector of the salient, there was repeated on this Western Front the phalanx concentration which Von Mackensen had used against the Russians during the previous summer, when thousands of guns, arrayed against a comparatively narrow area, burst and blazed a way through it, or, more accurately perhaps, smashed the Russian trenches, and, unopposed by their artillery—for, as we have stated already, the Russians were wofully short of guns and ammunition—slew the unfortunate troops of the Tsar holding those trenches, forced their supports and reserves to fall back, and, having gained a certain depth of territory, moved forward and repeated the process again and again, thus compelling continual retirement.

Here then, on the 19th February, 1916—a date which is destined to become historical—the Germans commenced on the Western Front, against the northern-most curve of the Verdun salient, a similar attack, an attack heralded by a storm of shells thrown from masses of artillery which had been collected for weeks past and hidden in the woods in that neighbourhood. There were guns dug in in every direction, guns which had been there, perhaps, since the commencement of the war; there were others artfully concealed in natural hollows; and there were yet again others, literally hundreds of them, parked close together in the woods and forests without other attempt at concealment—a huge mass of metal which, at a given signal, commenced to pound the French defences. Never before, without doubt, had such a storm of shell been cast on any one line of trenches; and continuing, as it did, for hours, ploughing the ground over a comparatively narrow stretch, it reduced everything within that selected area to a shapeless and tangled mass of wreckage. It was to be wondered at, indeed, that anything living could survive the ordeal. French trenches, stretching across the slope behind those meshes of laced barbed wire, were blotted out—were stamped out indeed—and soon became indistinguishable from the hundreds of cavities and craters and holes which marked the slopes across which they had run that morning. Fourteen-inch shells, seventeen-inch shells, and thousands of smaller missiles, ploughed through and rained over the line, and many a ponderous fellow found its way to the deep dug-outs and shelters which had long ago been prepared for such an eventuality. Smoke hid the sky on this 19th of February and the two days following, the smoke of bursting shells plunging upon the French positions, while the cannon which threw those shells were still hidden by the tangled woods clothing the ground occupied by the enemy. Yet, if the gallant *poilus* manning the French trenches were not in evidence, if, indeed, life was being stamped out of a number of them by this terrific avalanche of bursting metal, they were yet for all that not entirely unsupported, for already those guns behind the advance lines of our ally were thundering, while, overhead, fleets of aeroplanes were picking up the positions of German batteries, and were signalling back to those who had sent them.

Crouching in the depths of a dug-out, some thirty feet below the surface, a dug-out which shook and quivered as shells rained above it, Henri's comrades of the platoon smoked grimly, while that young fellow himself, once a Paris elegant, crouched in what was left of a fire-trench, now a mere shattered pit—and peered somewhat anxiously towards the open.

"And you are there still, mon ami?" called the Sergeant, when there was a five minutes' lull in the firing, "you find it warm perhaps, mon Henri? But you will hold to your post firmly—yes, you will do that, as will all our comrades."

His big, healthy, bearded face looked out from the narrow entrance of the stairs which gave access to the dug-out, and for a while he grinned, a friendly, encouraging grin, at our hero. Then those heavy thuds in the distance, and a loud burst close at hand, sent him diving back to shelter, leaving Henri alone, a pipe now gripped between his teeth, his rifle

slung over one shoulder, standing his ground, gazing before him, waiting for the first sign of an enemy attack.

"It will come soon, yes, very soon," the Sergeant said, when another lull in the firing arrived. "They will go on blazing away, throwing tons of metal at us, till they think they have blotted us out of existence, and then—then you will see they will swarm to the attack, these Germans."

Yet that did not prove to be the case, for, as a matter of fact, the Germans, profiting by the lesson they had learned in Russia, and imagining that they could as easily—more easily, in fact—repeat their exploit on this Western Front, had set out to capture Verdun by the aid of their artillery alone, and had every confidence of smashing their way to the town with but little else, and with but little use of their infantry. Continuing their tempest of shells for many hours, till it seemed that not one French soldier could have survived the bombardment of that northern sector, they then sent forward their sappers and mere patrols to discover what damage had been wrought, and to take over the new position. Behind them, massed in amongst the trees, were German battalions, prepared to advance at once and dig in and secure what the guns had gained for them.

"Attention! The enemy are coming," Henri bellowed through the mouth of the stairway leading to that dug-out where his platoon was sheltering. "I can see them crossing the open."

"And the shell-fire, mon ami? It has ceased? No, surely not," came the voice of the Sergeant.

"Tiens! Halt a little, my friends," said the voice of an officer sheltering in an adjacent dug-out and coming at that moment to the exit from it, "one little moment, for shells still rain upon the position. Keep a careful watch, my gallant Henri, and warn us in due time."

Henri therefore once more stationed himself behind the battered edge of what had been once the parapet of a well-made trench, and peered through a broken loophole at the distant enemy. He could see scattered parties of men trailing across the open, emerging from the distant cover afforded by the trees, and marching steadily, without haste, it seemed, towards the French positions. Then, glancing to his left and to his right, he caught glimpses of other sentries like himself, solitary Frenchmen stationed in those battered fire-trenches to watch for the coming of the enemy—the thinnest of thin garrisons, indeed, placed there to guard the French lines from sudden attack, and to present as few men as possible to the devouring shells cast by the Germans. It was the policy, in fact, of the French commanders to expose their men just as little as was possible; to hold up the advance of enemy attacks with as few numbers as was consistent with safety; and in the event of massed attacks, where the pressure was enormous, to create havoc in the ranks of the enemy with their guns, their machine-guns, and their rifles—to kill Germans on every and any occasion, and then, if circumstances dictated such a move, to withdraw their slender garrisons to a line farther back, exchanging so many yards of territory willingly

for the losses they had forced upon the Kaiser's soldiers. For this gigantic conflict in the West, this warfare devouring the nations of Europe, had, after the twentieth month of its outbreak, become more than ever a question of numbers. With teeming millions of soldiers at the commencement, Austria and Germany were able to fall upon their unprepared neighbours and almost to swamp their country; but the thin line of heroes who had dwelt in those trenches from the North Sea to the frontier of Switzerland had held the horde at bay, had kept it back until their comrades could rush to the rescue. Numbers were now far more equal; the toll of Germans taken by British and French and Belgians, and of Austrians and Germans by the Russians, had begun to tell upon the enemy effectives. Thanks to the mighty army which Britain had collected, the Allies were now greater in number than were the enemy, and, adopting a system devised by the French, were carefully saving their men, willingly giving ground if need be, if its tenure meant great losses, and always, both by day and night, taking every opportunity of killing Germans—yes, of killing Germans, of reducing the Kaiser's ranks, and of hastening the day when, with weakened numbers, Germany could no longer resist the onslaught of the armies of France and Britain and Belgium. Here, then, in front of Verdun, the French had but a mere handful in their first-line trenches—a mere handful—upon whom that torrent of shells was rained. Just a scattered, yet noble band, ready to hold up the assault which would most certainly follow.

Rifles cracked along the line while those sappers and patrols sent out by the enemy—who hardly believed life still possible in the shattered trenches—were shot down or driven back to cover. Henri then, peering over the trench, turned of a sudden and rushed to the entrance of the dug-out.

"Come!" he shouted. "Thousands of the enemy are coming from the shelter of the trees, and are massing in the open. It is an assault in force that we must resist."

Along that draggled line of trenches, which were almost blotted out of existence by now, and over which shells still rained in abundance, men whom the Germans imagined to have been killed long ago, to have been blown to pieces, popped out of the narrow entrances of dug-outs, clambered up the steep wooden steps from the caverns prepared in the earth, and, digging hard, made strenuous efforts to repair their trenches. Others sneaked along unsuspected galleries to holes far out in front of the line, where machine-guns were cunningly hidden; while, yet again, others plied to and fro along the communication-trenches, forcing their way past obstructions and falls of earth caused by the bombardment, hastening to procure more ammunition.

"It's an attack in force; hold your fire, mes enfants!" shouted the Commander of that section of the trenches in which Henri and Jules were stationed. "See them! Thousands of Boches coming from the trees and marching towards us. Hold them a little while, my comrades, and then we shall repay them for all that we have suffered. Hold, my friends, for though these trenches are now but furrows and holes in the ground, they yet give shelter enough for men who love their country and who would resist those who are advancing."

Shouts came along the line; men called across the battered traverses to one another; *poilus* sat at their machine-guns in those cunningly hidden pits, gripping the handles, their eyes riveted upon the sights and upon the enemy. Rifles were jerked into position, while men grabbed at packets of reserve ammunition, and, finding some convenient ledge, placed them close and handy.

"It will be a fight to the death, my Henri," called the Sergeant as cheerfully as ever, drawing at the stout pipe which he favoured—"a fight to the death; for not until we are wiped out shall Germans advance over this position."

Yes, it was to be a "fight to the death"; for the opening battle of the long series of tremendous conflicts which raged round Verdun for weeks later was to be amongst the most momentous and fiercest of them.

CHAPTER X

The Thin Line of Heroes

"They are coming! See them swarming from the trees yonder. Watch them tramping through the snow!

"Steady! Hold your fire! Let the guns alone deal with them. Bravo, mes amis, you are doing grandly! This is a day for the sons of France to let the enemy know they are still in existence."

Very quietly, with that sang-froid which the French possess, perhaps, above all others, with determination written on every face, both young and old, and with heroism shining from their features, those gallant *poilus*, all along the line sweeping across the crest of the hills facing the Germans—a stretch of ground ploughed deep now into a hundred furrows, shattered and shell-swept, and blasted in a thousand places into deep pits and craters—watched first as those small advance-parties, sent by the enemy to reconnoitre the situation, were shot down or driven back to shelter; and watched now with straining eyes and with many an exclamation as a horde of grey-coated infantry debouched from the evergreen woods encircling the eastern and northern slopes of the approaches to their position, and, forming up there, advanced steadily to attack them. They were still a great distance away, yet within effective rifle range; but as yet the time had not come to deal with them from the trenches. There were the guns right behind, cleverly hidden, dug in, posted in many an odd corner, laid upon the enemy from many a crevice in the ground and many a convenient hollow. Indeed, already the sharp snap of those soixante-quinze had begun to punctuate the air, and shrapnel-bursts could be seen above the evergreen tree-

tops upon the snow-clad slopes, and over hollows where the enemy were massing. But now, as the enemy cannonade died down a little, and that torrent of shells which had been hurtling upon the French trenches ceased a trifle, the din of the German bombardment was rendered almost noiseless, was shut out, as it were, was eclipsed, by the demoniacal rattle of those French 75's casting shell at the advancing enemy. The massed ranks marching from the cover of the trees, heads of columns appearing at the summit of many a ravine which gave access to the heights, battalions forming up outside their shelter, were smashed and rent by a tornado of shrapnel and shell which blew in the faces of the German formations, which severed the heads of columns from the bodies, which drove hideous gaps and holes in the centre of the ranks, and sent the mass, bleeding and broken and shattered, doubling back into cover.

But if the French had withstood that terrific bombardment to which a short sector of their front before Verdun had been subjected for so many hours, and had held on to a position, which others might well have termed untenable, with grim determination, the Kaiser's infantry were to prove on this eventful day—as on many another which followed—that they too were possessed of the strongest heroism. Governed by the strictest discipline, hounded on by armed officers if they showed the smallest hesitation, yet, to do them scant justice only, eager and ready for the fight in the majority of cases, the shattered ranks of the invader of France's soil re-formed under cover—under the shelter of the evergreen trees, under a persistent deluge of shrapnel from the 75's—re-formed, and, shoulder to shoulder, having debouched again into the open, set their faces once more uphill towards that shattered and battered line where the French were awaiting them.

No need to detach smaller parties to go forward and reconnoitre the ground, to tell them whether the enemy were still existing. It had been the sanguine hope of the Crown Prince—who was conducting this enormous manoeuvre—and his War Staff, that what had been done in Russia might well be repeated on the Western Front. Guns—a superiority of guns—guns and more guns, were the solution of the difficult problem which had faced the Germans for so many months past. That unbroken line on the west, those Frenchmen and soldiers of Britain and Belgium, in spite of their courage and tenacity, in spite of their trenches and redoubts and fortified positions which seemed impregnable, might yet be driven before the hordes of the Kaiser, and that with comparatively little loss; for, thanks to their gigantic preparations before the war commenced, Germany and Austria had still a preponderance of guns, and shells in amazing quantities. Here then was the opportunity: mass the guns—bring every available piece to this spot—and turn upon the enemy trenches such a torrent that trenches, redoubts, and fortified positions would be blotted out of existence, a way hewn through the Western line, with the expenditure of ammunition alone and with the loss of but few German lives. It was theory—German theory—which perhaps they were entitled to rely on, seeing what had happened in Russia; and yet a theory destined on this occasion, and in the weeks which followed, to prove utterly unreliable, utterly wrong, a grievous disappointment. For see! Those scattered parties sent to reconnoitre the battered ground had been killed or driven back; the preparations for a massed attack had been broken up and set at naught by the terrible 75's; and now, as the

German infantry debouched again, and, marching swiftly forward, came into full range of the slopes which the guns would appear to have rendered absolutely untenable, such a storm of bullets swept the ranks that the mass quivered, rocked and reeled, and then halted. Torn by shrapnel from above, its lines rent by machine-gun and rifle-firing, the attackers stood and rallied for a moment; then shouts burst from them of terror, of hatred, and of execration, only to be followed by hoarse commands to move forward. Then the masses broke. Isolated units started to charge up the slopes, and soon the mass of men, now no longer shoulder to shoulder, scattered over the slope, keeping yet so close together that bullets could scarce miss individuals, came doubling uphill, their heads down, their bayonets flashing in the wintry sun, their feet carving wide zigzag paths in the snow with which the ground was covered.

"They come! Fire on them! Let go! And prepare, if they come closer, to meet them with the bayonet."

The shout went along that shattered trench-line, and men stood on what was left of the firebank, or leaned their pieces on the edge of a shell-crater or some pit into which they had crawled for shelter, and, turning the muzzles on the enemy, blazed into their masses. Rifles grew hot, ammunition became exhausted, and yet only for a little while, for men fell on every side, and their comrades gripped at the contents of their pouches. Half in and half out of a trench, the sides of which had been blown into the interior almost filling it up, lying full length on his stomach, Henri poured bullets into the enemy, as cool as any cucumber, while Jules lay beside him, picking off his man at every shot, laughing, gesticulating, and quivering with excitement.

"Tiens! It's done! They fly! Bravo!"

The sergeant of Henri's platoon, one arm dangling helpless by his side, stretched out a brawny hand and gripped our hero's, while Jules—the somewhat hysterically inclined Jules—laughing uproariously, would have embraced the gallant Henri if the latter would have allowed it.

Officers shook hands with their men, while *poilus* turned and congratulated one another: for the thing was done. That handful of men which manned what was left of the French trenches had shattered the first German attack made upon the Verdun salient; and, with the help of the deadly soixante-quinze, had driven the Germans back to the place from which they had started—had driven back all who were still living.

"See them, those Germans still lying out there in the open," cried the Sergeant, standing now, his head and shoulders exposed, forgetful of his wounds, pointing down the snow-clad and trodden slopes to the part where the Kaiser's infantry had debouched from the forests. "See, the place is grey with their bodies; they are piled high one upon another, and there must be hundreds of them. Good! This is a devilish war, mes amis, a devilish war; for see how we gloat over their losses. But listen still more: this is France, and none shall invade her save at their peril."

For a while silence settled down over the scene of that sanguinary conflict, the guns of either side going out of action, while once more no sign was to be perceived of the Germans. Yet it was evident enough already that gigantic preparations had been made to beat in and flatten the Verdun salient; and, surprised to some extent as the French undoubtedly were, not by the attack itself, but by the immensity of the German arrangements for it, that lull after the first attack was at once put to service. Where possible, reinforcements were sent up to the front, while everywhere spades and picks were plied with energy.

"It's life or death to us," said an officer cheerfully as he came amongst the men of Henri's platoon. "See how the line has been broken up and our trenches smashed out of all recognition. But the Germans, too, have been smashed for a while, and therefore, while they rest, let us work and prepare other shelters. But wait! Yes, I have a message from the Commander. The Sergeant who was wounded has made a report. Tell me, then, where are those two men, Henri and Jules, who came from Ruhleben to bear their part in this fighting?"

Smeared with earth, coated with the soil of France from their steel helmets down to their army boots, their hands and faces grimy, their hair dishevelled, and yet their faces shining with enthusiasm and courage, Henri and Jules stood to attention before the officer and waited.

"So it is you, you two," he said, regarding them for some few seconds—"you two, Henri and Jules—names which every *poilu* seems to know most thoroughly—then, attention! These are the Colonel's words, uttered on the report of that Sergeant, who states that Henri and Jules showed conspicuous courage and determination, and have set a fine example to their comrades: you are no longer just plain soldiers of France, you are now entitled to wear the stripes of a corporal. And now, Corporal Henri, and you, Corporal Jules, back to your digging."

If our two gallant young heroes had laboured before with energy, they now put the utmost exertion into their work; for see what had happened! They were corporals, and had won promotion so early after joining the French army, not because of any social position they may have had in those days, now so long past, when these two young elegants thought of little that was serious; no, they had won promotion for bravery in the face of the enemy, because of the example they had set, because, indeed, they were good soldiers. It made them flush all over; it made them more determined than ever to prove themselves of value to their comrades; and, as we have said, it set them digging with such furious energy that those about them marvelled, and then, taking an example from them, well knowing that the time available for improving their shelter was limited, they too redoubled their efforts, till the perspiration was pouring from them.

It was perhaps two hours later, when dusk was falling and the wintry air was filled with snow-flakes, that the silence—that unnatural silence which had hung for so short a while about the northern area of the Verdun salient—was broken by a salvo of enemy

guns, and then by a roar, as each one of the two thousand and more pieces joined its voice in the chorus.

"Into your dug-outs! Take shelter! Get below as fast as you can!"

The order sailed along those broken trenches, now repaired in some measure, and sent men, who were not to remain on duty, down into the cleverly-constructed holes prepared for such an eventuality. And then commenced once more that terrible rain of shells, those devastating explosions, those upheavals of earth, and that process of smashing the French trenches. The dusk grew, until the darkness of night had fallen, and still the guns pounded, searching every inch of the line and not sparing a single corner. Yet, in spite of the gunners' efforts to do their best for the Kaiser, there were still nooks and crannies where French *poilus* sheltered, where men controlling search-lights played their beams over the slopes before them, and presently those self-same beams, flung along the broken face of the wooded country below, discovered movement.

"Another attack; men creeping from the forest and forming up out in the open. Let us hope that our gunners and observation-officers see them," said an officer who stood behind Henri at his post in the fire trench. "Now, my friend, shout into the dug-outs to warn the men, for it seems to me that very soon we shall need them."

Running along the trench, Henri put his head through the narrow opening of each of the dug-outs, while the men on either side of him did likewise. Then, returning to his post beside the officer, he watched, just as he had watched earlier in the day, though under different conditions; for then, but for the indifferent visibility of the atmosphere, the scene was clearly outlined to him; but now, what with the flakes of snow whirling hither and thither, what with the trampled snow-slopes between the trenches and the German positions, what with the cold, flickering beams of the search-lights, everything wore a strangely weird and ghostly appearance. Yes, ghostly, for the beams, travelling along those scattered lines of grey corpses down towards the fir-trees, made play with their figures. It looked, indeed, in that curious light, as if some of them were kneeling, and as if others were rising to their feet and were advancing uphill; and behind them, at the fringe of the woods, there were others, hundreds of others, seeming to stand still just now, and different in no way in appearance from those others lying out before them. But wait! In a little while, in a few minutes indeed, they were moving, they were sweeping on under the cold, inquisitive beams of the search-light, on under the pelting hail of shrapnel which the French 75's were now hurling at them, and, crossing those irregular lines of grey corpses, dashing to the assault, were charging uphill at a rate which threatened to bring them to grips with the French in a very few moments.

"Into the trenches! Stand to your rifles! Open fire on the enemy!"

Hoarse commands were called along the battered trenches, while once again men came stumbling up the wooden steps of their dug-outs, or went creeping along secret channels to machine-gun posts well in advance of the trenches.

"Now, let go at them; we have them in the open!"

A machine-gun immediately in front of Henri, hidden in a pit which was indistinguishable from the hundreds of others formed by exploding shells, suddenly spluttered, and, as Henri looked, the first line of German troops, racing uphill immediately before that gun, fell flat, was wiped out, and became non-effective. But other figures filled the place, men pushed themselves, or were pushed, forward into the vacated position, and without halt, without pause, or so much as a waver, torn though it was and shredded by the storm of bullets, that German mass still came charging uphill. Nothing stopped it. Suffering appalling losses, their front blown in in fifty different places, the enemy yet re-formed their ranks, and though, perhaps, retarded in their charge, were not definitely halted. Shouts were coming from that mass, shouts of men worked into a fever, of men crazy with terror or with hatred; of men perhaps drugged for this terrible ordeal, and who, having determined to capture the position, were prepared to welcome death rather than fail in their object.

"And what if they reach us, what then?" asked Henri of the officer still beside him, who in the meanwhile had seized the rifle of a wounded soldier and was emptying it into the ranks of the enemy. "What then, mon Capitaine? A charge with the bayonet—eh?"

"Yes, a charge with the bayonet! Make ready for it; pass the word to right and left! Fix your bayonets and make ready!"

But every bayonet along the line was already fixed, for indeed it is the habit of French troops to carry them so. Only, the men who wielded them, were they ready? Were they as full of courage and determination as were those Germans now so close to them? They, the handful of *poilus* whom the French High Command had alone spared for the protection of their front lines, had they the nerve, the grit, for a hand-to-hand combat? Shouts came from many a man, loud cheers burst from the throat of many a bearded veteran, while one young officer sprang on the battered parapet of a trench, and stood there facing his friends, calling to them, exhorting them, as the rays of a search-light played on his figure; indeed, for more than a minute he stood there, sharply outlined, a sight for all eyes, a figure which attracted the attention of every *poilu* within reach of him. And then, what a yell burst from the throats of the soldiers; they leapt from the trenches, and as the scattered beams, falling for just a few seconds here and there amongst them, lit up their figures, they could be seen massing on the pitted and furrowed ground in front, prepared for a last encounter.

"Charge! At them with the bayonet! Bravo, mes enfants!"

A tall, lithe officer—a colonel—was in front of the men already, his sword waving overhead, his head turned towards the men as he led them.

"Charge!" he shouted, though the sound was swept away and lost in the turmoil of cheers from the French soldiers who heard him, and in the shattering reports of those French 75's, which, blazing hard in the rear, registered still upon the enemy.

Then those gallant *poilus* who had poured over the parapets of their trenches—where such still existed—springing from shell-holes where they had taken shelter, and emerging from every sort of odd and unexpected corner, joined in one frantic mob, swept down under the rays of the search-light upon the enemy, and, plunging into their midst, commenced at once a desperate hand-to-hand encounter.

So it was where Henri and Jules were stationed, and the tale was repeated in a hundred different places. Indeed, on this 21st February, when the Germans had confidently anticipated a "walk-over", and when such an event as a massed attack, or even the loss of a considerable number of their infantry, was hardly contemplated, they found themselves held up entirely, with whole ranks of their divisions swept away, and with the ground in front of Brabant, Haumont, and along the northern face of the Verdun salient littered with their killed and wounded. That torrent of shells, which should have killed every one of the slender garrison of Frenchmen, had failed in its effect; while the hope of gaining Verdun, the capture of which was to influence the whole world, and particularly wavering neutrals, was as far away as ever. That desperate attack made during the darkness broke down as others had done, and the Germans—those who were left of them—fled to the cover of the evergreen pine-trees, leaving the *poilus* of General Joffre's armies to stagger back to their battered trenches, there to prepare—not to rest, not to sleep, for that was out of the question—but to resist still further.

CHAPTER XI

Falling Back

Down below, in a subterranean chamber, there burned a cheerful fire, a chimney taking the smoke and flames up through the ground above and into the open. Seated about it, more dishevelled than ever, their chins bristly now, and their faces and hands stained a dull, dirty colour, sat Jules and Henri and others of their comrades, resting for a time, while men of their regiment watched for them.

"And, believe me, it has been a fight of fights," said one bearded veteran, lolling back against the earth wall of the dug-out, a cup of steaming coffee gripped in one huge, dirty hand, and a hunch of cheese in the other. "A fight more bitter than any that has gone before it, and one which will become more desperate. Allons! Here is death to the Kaiser!"

He smiled round at his comrades, whose faces were lit up by the rays from the flickering flames, showing a gleaming row of teeth, and steady eyes, and features which displayed not the smallest trace of fear, or even of anxiety.

"Death to the Kaiser—to the butcher who sends his troops to such slaughter!"

Tossing his head backwards, he let the contents of the cup gurgle down his throat, then, smacking his lips, he held the vessel out for a further ration.

Steps on the wooden stairway leading into the dugout just then attracted the attention of the whole party, and soon there arrived another comrade—a junior officer—to swell their numbers, to tax the limit of accommodation down below to the utmost. As dirty as any of his men, dirtier perhaps, he bore about him traces almost of exhaustion, and, throwing himself on the ground, silently accepted the drink and food which were at once offered him. It was not, indeed, until he had finished his meal, and until he had almost smoked the contents of one pipe-load of tobacco, that he opened his lips to the *poilus*.

"And then, Monsieur le Lieutenant," began one of the *poilus*, a cheerful young fellow, who, indeed, was in civil times the chum of this young officer, "you've been far, mon Commandant, you have brought news to us? For did you not leave us a while back to pass along the communication-trenches? What, then, is the tale? And are there supports and reserves at hand to reinforce us?"

Again it was to be noted that there was not a sign of anxiety on the face of this young soldier, nor in the tones which he adopted. He merely smiled and shrugged his shoulders, in fact, as the officer shook his head decidedly.

"No! No supports, and no reserves at present," he said. "We must fight it out to a finish."

"Bien! To a finish, my friends!" chirped in the bearded warrior, sipping at a fresh cup of steaming coffee. "Then it is not for us to grumble, but rather for the Boches. For, see, desperate men who cannot be relieved, and who will not surrender, fight like rats in a trap, and such beasts were ever venomous. And so, Monsieur le Lieutenant, there are none to help us?"

"None!" came the cheery answer. "The position is as clear as daylight. It is only now that our High Command is able to perceive that the Germans have launched a stroke at Verdun, which is stronger, and likely to be fiercer, than any that have preceded it on any other portion of the line. They tried, these Boches, to burst their way through Ypres in April, you will remember, having failed to do so in the previous October. They have tried their hand in other parts, and always with failure. Now it is the turn of Verdun—a salient like that at Ypres, and one which must be held against all oncomers. You ask the fortunes of our other troops. Listen, then, my friends; for by dint of crawling and creeping, often across the open—for communication-trenches have been obliterated—I was able to reach a centre where information had been gathered. We, here, in the neighbourhood of Brabant, stand firm, thanks to the heroic fighting of our comrades."

"And thanks, monsieur, to the noble leading of our officers," declared the bearded veteran; whereat the *poilus* clapped their hands in approbation.

The officer's face was radiant at such a compliment, which, let us observe, was thoroughly well deserved; for if the *poilu*, the common soldier of the French armies facing the Germans, had fought well, his officer had indeed set him a magnificent example.

Much need, too, had the *poilus* holding the Verdun salient for the best of officers. For the German onslaught, though it had failed so far, had at least the prospect of future success because of the surprise effected. Not that the attack was entirely unexpected on the part of the French, but surprise was great at the vast preparations and massed guns and infantry the actual attack had disclosed to our ally. Those guns had first deluged every few yards of the twenty-five miles of trenches from Brabant to Troyon, and later, swinging round, had been concentrated on a narrow sector of four miles perhaps, a sector occupied by Henri and his friends and other Frenchmen.

As to the German infantry, they were in great numbers. Indeed, there were some seven German army corps massed against the Verdun salient; while the French, with incomplete information of the intending coup to be attempted by the enemy, had but two army corps to defend the positions. Moreover, time would be required in which to bring up reinforcements; for, be it remembered, the Verdun salient is pushed out to the east of the River Meuse, and though there are bridges crossing the river, they are not so numerous as to allow of huge forces being rapidly transferred across them. A still more important factor in the position was, perhaps, the distance those reserves must be brought before they could stand shoulder to shoulder with their comrades. It is not mis-stating the fact on the night of the 21st February when we assert that those two French army corps, holding a trench-line extending over some twenty-five miles, stood, for the time being and for many hours to come, alone between the enemy and their objective. They must fight not only to retain their positions, but must fight for time—time in which General Joffre and his commanders could rush reinforcements to assist them. Yet, though the battle had only lasted one single day, it had proved every man in those two corps a stanch fighter, every one determined to resist to the utmost.

"We here, in the neighbourhood of Brabant, my friends, hold fast as you know," said the officer, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. "Though the enemy have poured shot and shell on us, though they have blown our positions up and obliterated our trenches, we are here; and, indeed, do I not see before me a most cheery and merry company? Yes, another cup of coffee as I smoke and talk. It is cold outside, and somehow coffee soothes a man's nerves after such an ordeal. Well, then, here we are, firm, and not thinking of retiring yet awhile. On the line to Haumont, they, our comrades, hold their battered trenches, and, like ourselves, have taught the enemy a severe lesson. Then, passing to our right, you get to the Bois de Caures, which this morning was held by a French garrison. If we in this position were plagued with the fire of enemy guns, in that strip of forest our friends have been deluged, and their positions torn asunder and blown to pieces, even their dug-outs often being penetrated. The place became untenable, and yet it has been of assistance in the

fighting. It was mined, and when the Germans, held off till that time by our sharpshooters, launched a division at it, our fellows slipped away before the enemy, and, waiting till the Germans were in the wood and pouring into the battered trenches, fired the mines, killing hundreds of them."

There came grunts from that bearded veteran, a gleam of his even white teeth, and muttered remarks from the others seated about the fire in the dug-out.

"Terrific!" exclaimed Henri. "Absolute murder; yet, what would you?"

"Yes, what would you?" repeated the officer. "It is France, it is liberty, it is the right to live as we wish for which we fight, against the oppression of a people who look upon might as right, and who, if they could, would deprive France and Britain and all the Allies of their liberty. So, murder! Yes, my comrade, but, as you observe, necessary. If the Kaiser, seeking for some great event, casts his hosts of men at us, our duty is plain; not an inch of ground of the sacred soil of France must be rendered up unless absolutely necessary; while the enemy, if they advance, must advance over the corpses of their comrades. But let me proceed. The Bois de Caures was evacuated, and then the southern end of it seized once more by some of our gallant fellows. Then there was fighting on the line to Ornes and at Herbebois, and there, too, the garrisons held their positions, having fought throughout the day and inflicted enormous losses on the Boches. Elsewhere I cannot tell you what the position is, though there is rumour that all is favourable."

Taking it in turns to go on duty, to watch the ground in front of them or to repair their battered trenches, that slender garrison which the policy of the French High Command had placed in the first line of trenches about the salient of Verdun waited with calm confidence for the morrow—for the 22nd February. Nor had they long to wait ere the conflict once more reopened. Guns had boomed throughout the night, and shells had continued to rain about them, but now, as light broke, and they hastily gulped down their breakfast, the bombardment increased in intensity along that northern sector, while presently enemy troops could be seen forcing their way up a ravine which cuts its way between Brabant and Haumont. *Poilus* in positions there were driven back for a moment by flame-projectors, which were used freely by the enemy—spurts of flaming liquid were scattered over them, and sometimes whole lengths of trenches set burning. Then the torrent of shells which was pouring upon the northern sector was increased, though that had seemed almost impossible, in the neighbourhood of those two places. Brabant and Haumont were shattered, the village of the latter name being flattened out and destroyed utterly. Shells ploughed the ground behind the French front position, so that communication-trenches, which had suffered severely on the previous day, and support- and reserve-trenches were blown to pieces and out of all recognition. Indeed, as the day passed, the slender garrison in that part were forced to abandon whatever protection the ground had previously given, and, retiring before the enemy, to fight a rear-guard action in the open. Some three or four miles of country behind that front line was indeed searched by the enemy guns; some indication of the enormous expenditure of shells indulged in by the Kaiser. The French left, resting on the River Meuse and the centre, was thus forced backward, though the

gallant garrison of Herbebois still held on, together with a force of men on a hill just south-west of them. Some success had in fact fallen to the German phalanx attack on the Verdun salient. General von Haeseler, who was nominally in command, though acting under the orders of the ambitious Crown Prince of Germany, had by his smashing artillery-fire, though not by his infantry attacks, forced the French to abandon a portion of their trenches, and had indeed shortened that line to which we have referred previously—that line which formed an imaginary base to the Verdun salient. In fact, he had contrived to narrow the neck of the salient, though not yet very greatly, and thereby had limited the space across which the French troops could retire in the event of the abandonment of the salient being necessary.

Repeating the process on the following day—for by then the French had fallen back to their second line, now badly battered, at Samogneux and Hill 344—these new positions were assailed with such a torrent of shells that by the evening they were absolutely untenable, and a further retirement was essential. Indeed, by the morning of the 24th, the French left, as it lay on the River Meuse, was withdrawn to the famous Pepper Hill, so that the distance between the new first line and the city of Verdun was considerably decreased, while that imaginary base-line, across which the French must retreat if the salient was to be evacuated, was still further shortened. But elsewhere, where artillery-fire had given the enemy less assistance, where, indeed, massed guns could not be spared to blaze a path towards Verdun, desperate fighting held up the advance of the Germans. At Herbebois and Ornes and on to Bezonvaux there was hand-to-hand fighting of the most desperate nature, while at Maucourt—an advance position held by the French—terrific execution was done to the masses of troops hurled forward by the Germans. Here masked French quick-firing guns caught German columns of attack, twenty men abreast and hundreds deep, at close range, and blew them into eternity. Yet the hordes still came on, with a bravery never surpassed, and, in spite of every effort, in spite of a superb display of courage and tenacity, the French were forced to retire up the slopes towards Bezonvaux, and so in the direction of the fortress of Douaumont perched up aloft and looking down upon the scene of this sanguinary conflict. Towards the former of these two places the garrison of Ornes was also compelled to beat a retreat, finding itself at Bezonvaux, at the mouth of a ravine, which ascends the heights leading to that fortress already mentioned, which was to be the scene of a terrible battle in days now near at hand. To portray all that occurred on this eventful 23rd February would be almost impossible, and certainly beyond the scope of these pages; yet one must mention the case of those gallant Zouaves and African sharpshooters, who, to the north of Douaumont, recaptured a wood between Herbebois and Hill 351, which is just to the south-west of it, and lies in front of Beaumont. Here, in spite of an avalanche of shells which was poured upon them, and of murderous attacks launched in their direction, they held out for quite a considerable period, and, having in turn retired upon the Bois de Fosse, were eventually compelled to fall back upon the plateau of Douaumont.

The morning of the 24th, as it dawned, discovered, indeed, a critical change in the positions held by our noble allies. The northern face of the salient had, as we have described, been driven in, and the handful of troops holding it had been forced to retire

over some four miles of country, fighting in the open, infantry and gunners fighting a terrific rear-guard action, and doing their utmost—and doing that most gallantly—to hold up a further advance of the enemy. That imaginary base-line which we have mentioned as running across the base of the salient, where the winding River Meuse traces its path amongst the hills, had been dangerously shortened, and already Germans were massing in the neighbourhood of Vacherauville, close down to the river, under the shadow of the Côte du Poivre, where they hoped to drive in their wedge, and to further shorten that line across which French troops must retreat if indeed the salient was to be evacuated. And towards the east, towards the apex of the salient, outlying advance-parties of the French had been driven in by sheer weight of guns and numbers, and were now back on the heights of the Meuse, their line drawn from that held by their comrades in the neighbourhood of Louvemont, close to the Côte du Poivre, round about Douaumont and its village, and so to Vaux and south of it. Here, indeed, we must leave them for a moment, while we return to Henri and Jules and their comrades, entangled in that country to the north which had been ploughed, almost every foot of it, by the torrent of shells poured upon it by the Kaiser's artillery.

Stealthily creeping away from their advanced positions, and leaving these dull-grey lines of German dead stretched out before them—a ghastly indication of their prowess—the troops fell back in clusters, clambering from shell-hole to shell-hole, creeping behind any cover which was to be discovered, and making the utmost use of the darkness.

"And so it is you—you, Jules?" cried Henri, as dawn broke on the early morning of the 23rd and discovered his comrade. "Well, I never!"

It was typical of the gallant and gay Jules that he grinned in the face of his chum, and repeated the observation.

"Well, I never! And what a sight to be sure! We were gentlemen when escaping from Ruhleben compared with our condition now. What a mess to be in, to be sure—and how hungry I am!"

"Hungry, mon garçon?" cried a sergeant near them, one of their own battalion; "then there's good news for you; for if our commanders have not been able to send us reinforcements, they have at least not forgotten that we are living men. There is food close at hand, and our cooks are preparing it."

In the lines which the troops had now gained in those trenches dug some time before, and sweeping across the slopes of Pepper Hill (Côte du Poivre), there were indeed welcome comforts for the men who had so gallantly held up the advance of the Germans, and who had more gallantly still, and with greater fortune, endured the terrible ordeal of that shattering torrent of shells poured for hours now upon them. Back behind the fire-trenches cooks were busy over their braziers, while already kettles of steaming soup and coffee and long rolls of bread were being conveyed to the soldiers. It was a happy, a grimy, and a decidedly confident band of men who sat down that early dawn to prepare

once more for the enemy. Dishevelled, their chins covered with dirty bristles, steel helmets lost in numerous cases, clothing torn, and equipment absent, this band of heroes was nevertheless as jovial as it was hungry.

"Better get as much sleep as you can now, my friends," said an officer as he came along the trench. "A few men to keep watch will be quite sufficient, and the rest had better turn in to their dug-outs or lie down here at their posts. It won't be for long, my lads, I can tell you, for the Germans are not likely to rest now they have got us moving. Wait, though; is there a man amongst you not too fatigued to creep forward and reconnoitre?"

"There is, mon Capitaine; I am that man."

"And I also—here; ready and eager."

The two voices were those of Jules and Henri, who happened to be quite close to the officer as he was speaking, and who, leaping to their feet from the fire-bank, at once stood at attention, their eager faces turned towards him.

"You—ah!"

The officer surveyed them both critically.

"Henri and Jules—our particular Henri and Jules—mon Capitaine," called out the sergeant who had been speaking to them a little while before, and who, like the regiment, knew our two heroes thoroughly. "Henri and Jules, who joined us from Ruhleben, and preferred to fight in a battle such as this rather than stay in safety—though not in comfort—in Ruhleben."

"Ah! Henri and Jules, of course. And you are ready?" smiled the officer.

"Ready, mon Capitaine!" the two answered.

"Then strip off your packs and equipment, and take only your rifles and bayonets and ammunition; creep down through the trees yonder, and, if you can, let us know what's happening."

Down below, towards the foot of the lower slopes of the Côte du Poivre, overlooking the village of Champneuville and the Côte de Talou, stretched a strip of wooded country, those same evergreens which, towards the north and elsewhere, had given the Germans such tremendous opportunities for completing preparations for their attack upon the salient. Sliding down the hill, diving from one shell-hole to another—for already the German artillery had turned its attention to this new French position—creeping along any fold in the ground which offered even the smallest shelter, Henri and Jules soon gained the woods, and plunged into them.

"It's as likely as not that the Germans have already sent reconnoitring-parties here," said Henri in a whisper, as they crouched at the edge of the wood and gathered breath again after their exertions. "That is a thing which one would anticipate, and of course our commanders will expect that just as we do, so that it seems to me our duty is to steer clear of such parties, as we should do in any case, to push beyond them, and to ascertain what's happening towards the north."

"Quite so! At your orders, Henri," smiled Jules, as full of merriment as ever. Indeed, the fiercer the conflict had grown, the more desperate the efforts of the Germans had become, and the more terrifically the fighting had developed, the higher had this young fellow's spirits risen. Of fear he showed not a trace, though of excitement he showed every evidence. Sparkling with wit, as lively as a cricket, wonderfully cheery, he had stood in the forefront of the battle, not grim like many a comrade, not with teeth set and hands and fingers clenching his rifle, but jovial, smiling, yet with a deadly earnestness masked by his merry manner.

"Lead on, my Henri," he said. "Under your directions we made not such a bad success of that affair in Germany. Let's see now what you can do in this part of France when we have soldiers and not civilians to deal with!"

Plunging on into the wood, it was not long before they heard voices to their left, and, creeping forward, discovered a German officers' patrol sheltering under the trees and munching their breakfast. A dozen yards farther on there were some seven or eight men, while voices still farther to the left demonstrated the fact that there were other parties.

"No matter," said Henri; "we have already said that we expected Germans to be in the wood. What we want to know is where the main force is. Let's push on and do our duty."

CHAPTER XII

A Reconnoitring-party

For perhaps half an hour Henri and Jules crept through the wood which they had gained from the heights of the Côte de Poivre, turning and twisting here and there as German voices warned them of the proximity of enemy parties, and sometimes stealing past a group of men from whom they were separated by only a few feet of thick undergrowth.

"There's the edge of the wood yonder, the northern edge," said Henri in a little while, stopping and looking upward. "It's lighter in that direction, and without doubt we are now getting down to the road which runs from Beaumont to Vacherauville—a road likely enough to be used by the enemy in his advance on our positions. Look out that we don't expose ourselves at the edge, and let us talk only in whispers."

Jules gripped him a moment later by the sleeve and pulled him down forcibly to the ground, then he shot one hand out and pointed.

"See them," he whispered; "hundreds of men sheltering at the edge of the wood. But why? What's the reason? And listen to those guns! German—eh?"

"No. French 75's, without a question," answered Henri when they had listened for a few moments. "There's nothing else on earth in the artillery line that snaps and barks quite like our soixante-quinze, and it seems to me that they are opened in this direction. Hope to goodness they won't turn their muzzles on this wood, for they would rake it from end to end with shrapnel. Now let's move on a little. I can see the men you have pointed out, and without a doubt they are sheltering under the trees and hiding, I should say, from our gunners. Let's turn from the road a little and push on to the northern point of the wood, for in that direction it almost joins with the Bois des Fosses, and should give us greater opportunities."

They turned slightly to their right, and crept through the mass of trees not yet levelled by the gun-fire of either of the combatants—different, indeed, from the Bois des Caures and the Herbebois, where gigantic German shells had sent trees and earth hurtling skywards, had severed trunks in all directions, and had left but a tangled mass of fallen tree-tops and shattered stumps, smouldering here and there, and masking the trenches and dug-outs and redoubts obliterated during the earlier fighting, masking, too, the bodies of those gallant Frenchmen who had given their lives for the cause, and of the Germans, who had fought to achieve the ambitions of their Kaiser.

Sneaking forward, and keeping well away from the direction of voices, it was not long before Henri and Jules discovered a dell—a deep depression in the ground—heavily wooded and overhung by fir-trees, at the foot of which splashed a stream, which passed from rock to rock, twisting and twining as it flowed towards the Meuse traversing the ground down below.

"Might give us an opportunity of seeing far more than if we went on in the wood," suggested Jules, again catching Henri by the sleeve.

"Why not? Certainly! Why not?" echoed Henri. "Quite a good idea; capital! Let's try it."

"Then down we go! Looks like a splendid place," declared Jules as he gained the stream and splashed into it. "I'll lead, for a change. Suppose we'd better go cautiously?"

There was, indeed, need of caution all the while, for as they traversed that narrow gully, and descended towards the plain which stretches at the foot of the Hill of Poivre, and, crossing the foot of the Côte de Talou, reaches the River Meuse, they found themselves in the midst of a veritable army of Germans—figures in field-grey could be seen in the twilight beneath the trees, sitting on fallen branches or on the ground waiting for orders. There were figures in the same colour to the right and to the left of them in that ravine, and once, as the two halted suddenly and crouched beneath an overhanging bush, they saw a German soldier actually drinking from the stream within a few yards of them; but a guttural voice above, a sharp command, sent the man scrambling up the bank of the ravine to join his company. Then, as they boldly advanced, the voices of German troops grew less distinct, and presently, as the light increased in brightness and they gained the very edge of the wood, it was to discover that they had passed through the enemy's lines, and were, it appeared, alone once more and almost in the open.

"THEY SAW A GERMAN SOLDIER ACTUALLY DRINKING FROM THE STREAM WITHIN A FEW YARDS OF THEM"

"THEY SAW A GERMAN SOLDIER ACTUALLY DRINKING FROM THE STREAM WITHIN A FEW YARDS OF THEM"

Creeping beneath a bush, the two now stared out in every direction, while, taking a pencil from a pocket, and a tattered envelope also, Henri roughly sketched in the situation before him; and, helped by the unobstructed view he could obtain from the opening of the ravine, marked spots in the near distance, where, beneath the shelter of other trees, in folds of the ground, in a farm across the road, he could discern enemy troops hiding.

"There must be thousands of them," he told Jules after a while, "thousands of them; and look over there, to what I believe to be Samogneux, where we were yesterday, and from which the German guns literally blew us, watch the roads there and the edge of the Bois de Caures—what do you see, Jules?"

"See!" exclaimed Jules; "almost hear them, you mean. Thousands of Boches—literally thousands of them, Henri. What's that mean? They are turning in this direction, and though it's hard to make it out quite clearly, I should say that they are waiting for the dusk to fall, fearing our guns across the river. It looks precisely what one would expect it to be—an intended advance on Vacherauville—a descent on a line directly from the north towards Verdun—the city for which they are making."

Without a doubt the two French *poilus*, sheltering there beneath that bush, had obtained information of more than ordinary importance, though it was likely enough that the movements of the enemy, in some respects at least, were already known by the French staff far behind them. Still, in a case like this, even a morsel of news might help to turn the scale against the Germans; and, having obtained it, the two at once set about the return to their comrades.

"We'll creep up the stream again and keep to the ravine as long as possible," said Henri; "after that we shall have to take our chances in the wood. And, seeing that we were lucky enough to miss the Germans on our way here, I don't see why we shouldn't be successful in returning."

"And if we ain't," declared Jules, with one of those ready smiles of his, "we can't help it; only, of course, a fellow might even then make good his escape by bolting."

An hour later, having very cautiously crept through those men massed just within the wood and out of sight of the French gunners, and having also traversed a long stretch of thickly wooded ground where numerous parties of Germans were resting, the two drew near to that point where they had entered the wood, and behind which open country led to the French positions. By then the shadows beneath the trees had deepened, as dusk had almost fallen, so that it was almost difficult to avoid the trunks of trees, and easy enough to tumble into any person who, like themselves, might be under that cover. Thus, of a sudden, it happened that Henri and Jules plunged into a narrow patch where men were seated, and, stumbling over their legs, were brought up suddenly.

"What's this? Who's this? You clumsy ruffian!" a shrill voice shouted. "Get out with you! But wait! What are you doing here without permission?"

"Stop! My word! The fool's kicked my shin and almost broken my leg. Here, one moment!"

Someone growled an oath, and, shooting out a hand, gripped Henri by the shoulder as he was rising—someone who had rapped out a German oath, let us explain, while the two voices had without a doubt borne the customary guttural accent of the Teuton.

"Let go!"

Henri picked himself up like lightning, and, swinging the butt of his rifle round—for the weapon was hanging over his right shoulder—struck the figure he could but dimly see beside him, and heard at once a dull thud as the wooden stock rapped the man's head violently. Then, with a dive, he gained the trees, and, pausing for a moment, shouted for his comrade.

"Jules! Here," he called. "Here!"

"Here!" came the answer from the point which Henri had only just left, and was followed by a somewhat smothered cry and by a heavy fall, which made it appear as though Jules had been detained by the men into whose midst they had stumbled.

What was Henri to do? Desert his friend and turn and fly away to the French positions? Or go back to his friend?

"The former," he told himself. "At any other time I would turn back and do my best for Jules, whatever it cost; but there's information which must be handed over to my Commanding Officer, and I must go. Jules!" he shouted again in one last effort.

A second later he was enfolded in the arms of a man who had crept up behind him, and who, joined by another within an instant, soon forced Henri to the ground, and, taking him by the legs, dragged him to the spot where Jules was already a prisoner.

"Now, strike a light," a gruff voice said, "just a match, Fritz, and let's see whom we have captured. Oh! Oh! French soldiers—eh? Well, there's nothing very wonderful about that, seeing that we've driven them from Brabant and Haumont, and there must be scores of unfortunate beggars hiding up in the hollows and woods between that position and this. Well, you," he continued, breaking into French, "French soldiers—eh? on your way to join your own lines again. You were fighting at Brabant?"

"Yes, at Brabant!" Henri told him.

"Ah! And received a terrible drubbing. Well, now, what shall we do with them?" asked the same voice—a pleasant enough voice now that the owner of it had got over the start which the sudden incursion of Jules and Henri had caused him—the voice, indeed, of an officer; for, as it proved, this was an officers' party into which the two who had made that daring reconnaissance had stumbled.

"Do with them? Do with them?" snapped a voice. "Shoot them! For there are no men here to hand them over to."

The one who had spoken earlier made no reply, but Henri could hear him giggling, as though he were amused at the callous remark made by his comrade, and as though, anxious not to be a party in such disgraceful treatment of prisoners, he was purposely avoiding discussion. But a moment later the other once more interjected a question.

"What, then?" he asked. "Are we to stay, then, with these two on our knees, as it were, and wait till some of our men come along and take them over? Who knows? They might turn upon us at any moment and cut our throats, for there are only four of us. I vote for shooting them out of hand."

It was an unpleasant voice this—a snappy, vixenish, sharp-toned voice, which appeared to come from an individual of rather diminutive size, though it was only his bare outline that was visible in the darkness beneath the trees.

"Nasty little beggar," thought Henri; while Jules, now released, save that one of the German officers still gripped him by the sleeve, stood close to his comrade. "Nasty little beggar! Spiteful little rat! And somehow we seem to have met before, for the voice rings in a familiar way. But, pooh! it's not possible, or, rather, hardly possible."

A moment later there came the grating sound of a match being rubbed against the side of a box, and then a light flared beneath the trees, to be shaded instantly by the huge hand of the individual who held it, and who proved to be the other spokesman—he of the pleasant voice—who had listened to the suggestion of his comrade without answering. The reflection of the flame held in his palm lit up at first a face beaming with health and good humour, heavily moustached, and as red as was Stuart's. There was a cigarette in his mouth, and Henri, attracted by the light, watched as this German officer puffed at the flame and then ejected a cloud of smoke. His own features, too, were illuminated by that reflected light, and those of Jules also beside him, while an instant later the face of that other officer came into view, the one with the sharp, mean voice, who was for shooting his prisoners. Then a sudden exclamation escaped the latter, and, starting forward just as the flame expired, he stared hard at Henri and his comrade.

"What's this? What's this?" he demanded. "Strike another light, Ernst. I have met these fellows before somewhere; I feel sure of it."

Grumblingly the big man who had just lit his cigarette struck another light, and, sheltering the flame between his two broad palms, brought it close to the faces of the prisoners, illuminating at the same time his own features and those of the officer who had last spoken. One glance was sufficient for Henri then, and in a moment his thoughts flew back to Ruhleben, to that little hovel down in the corner of the camp—the tool-house—which the Germans had considered even too good for their unfortunate prisoners. And outside it; to that scene which he and Jules and Stuart had witnessed on that eventful evening when they made their escape. He could see the rotund figure of the Landsturm sentry being heckled; the figure of the blustering sergeant who had cross-examined him so fiercely, and had well-nigh frightened him out of his senses; and before them a third individual—a shorter, shrivelled-up officer, risen from the ranks undoubtedly—that one who had leapt into the tunnel and had gone scrambling along to discover what steps had been taken by the prisoners to break out of the camp. The selfsame individual, indeed, whom Stuart had extricated from the hole behind the entanglements and had dashed

backwards into the tunnel. Similarly, in just as few seconds, the German recognized Henri and Jules.

"Those two!" he shouted—"the men who escaped from Ruhleben with an Englishman! Seize them! No, no! Let us shoot them now, for they would certainly be shot on returning to Germany."

The match died down at that instant and was dropped to the ground, leaving the group in utter darkness, and leaving Henri and Jules in the centre wondering what to do, distressed at their discovery, and feeling that the situation was almost hopeless. Then, of a sudden, Henri slid his left hand back and caught Jules by the sleeve; pulling him towards him, he whispered a sentence in his ear; and, a moment later, plunging forward, drove his fist into the face of the officer who had recognized him, and, pushing on over his fallen figure, burst from the group into the wood outside. Following on his heels, Jules cleared a path for himself, and, hearing the crash of undergrowth in front of him, held on in that direction, heedless of the shouts which came from the group of German officers and of the shots which were fired at them. Five minutes later Jules heard panting in front of him, and, stealing forward, gave vent to a gentle whisper.

"Is that you, Henri?" he asked.

"Yes, Jules," came back the panting answer; whereat Jules joined him, and the two sat for a while at the base of a big tree, resting and recovering their breath, and wondering what they were to do now that their presence in the wood had been discovered.

"A pretty kettle of fish," said Henri at last. "But what luck to have escaped from those fellows; and how mad that German officer will be to know that we have twice slipped through his clutches! A nasty little fellow, Jules! The sort of man who would shoot us out of hand if he had the opportunity."

"Then the sooner we get out of this and back to our friends the better. Besides, there's that news we have got for our commander. Let's make tracks now," said Jules. "By creeping along carefully, and listening for voices, we may be able to steer clear of the Germans and reach the open."

"Listen to them!" whispered Henri. "It's evident they've no fear of the French overhearing them, and that they are searching the woods for us. That's all the better for us, Jules, as you suggest, and by listening carefully we ought to be able to creep past them."

As it proved, the attempt to extricate themselves from their awkward position was not by any means easy; for the discovery made by that officer, and the anger it induced, caused him to call up a number of men who were resting in the woods within easy distance. Sentries were at once thrown out, so as to place a barrier between the two French soldiers so recently discovered and the open country lying between the woods and the French positions. Then other soldiers were set to work to search the woods, a few of them

even producing lanterns. Yet, by dint of crawling, of hiding in hollows and under brushwood, and by steering a course away from approaching voices, Henri and Jules at length managed to place themselves beyond the barrier of sentries, and, rising then to their feet, ran on through the wood till they gained its edge and emerged into the open.

Then commenced the final stage of their journey. Crawling over the flat plain which swept gently down to the River Meuse, on the far side of which lay the Goose Hill, Caurette Wood, Crow's Wood, the Mort Homme, and Hill 304—positions to win unending fame in this warfare in the neighbourhood of Verdun—they gained at length the ground which ascended on their left towards the Poivre Hill, and beyond that again, giving access to the plateau of Douaumont, a plateau destined to see some of the most tremendous fighting in this conflict. Here, anticipating easy going and a country free from the enemy, the two stood upright—for they had been crouching and creeping along before—and marched rapidly towards their destination. But if that slope had been free of Germans during the daytime—as indeed it was, for the guns of the French lining the crests of Poivre Hill commanded it completely—the darkness which had now fallen and hidden all objects had made a most decided difference.

There was the loud tramp of feet on the road which led from Beaumont to Vacherauville, and, as the two drew nearer to that village, they could hear columns of men approaching along the road from Samogneux. A lull in the terrific bombardment, which had now been going on continuously since the 19th February, allowed them even to hear the voices of the Kaiser's soldiers as they closed in upon the French positions—upon that base-line to which we have referred, the line of the Meuse, beyond which lay the Verdun salient.

"There's not a doubt about it," said Henri in a whisper, as he and Jules shrank into a hole behind a bush and waited for a column of troops to pass along the road, "the enemy is preparing for an attack in force to-morrow, via Vacherauville; and, with what we have already seen in the wood, and what we hear now, we have information of the utmost importance. There must have been hundreds of men in the wood."

"Thousands!" Jules corrected him. "Thousands of them! And there are thousands here, too, marching along this road. Listen, now, to those guns being hauled behind the troops. One can only guess that there are many of them by the noise they make, and it surprises me that our men on the far side of the river haven't heard the sounds and opened fire upon the enemy. Wait! What's that?"

The "that" to which Jules referred proved to be a detachment of German troops from the road along which they had been marching, and presently figures could be seen stealing across the grass, steadily streaming past, between them and their friends, struggling forward to take up a position for an attack on the morrow. Orders were given in low gruff tones by officers accompanying those men, while now and again there came the click of accoutrements and the metallic ring of entrenching-tools carried with the parties. Nor was that all; for presently, when the stream of figures had poured past for some minutes, till

hundreds had gone by, in fact, and the last of the column had halted, there came to the ears of Henri and his friend the dull blow of picks, the scrape of spades against flints and stones, and the rattle of earth as it was thrown out of an excavation.

"Digging trenches—digging themselves in! Preparing for our counter-attack to-morrow! And digging themselves in between us and our positions! Now, that's very awkward!" reflected Henri.

"Beastly awkward!" agreed Jules. "But there's one thing about it—it's dark, and, seeing that we have already escaped from the very midst of these same fellows, it seems to me that we may hope to do that again anywhere. Anyway, we must try."

"Certainly, we must try! We must get through them without further delay, for every moment now is of increasing importance."

Stealing forward from the bush, they slowly approached the line which the Germans were then preparing with entrenchments, and could now hear from those portions closest at hand the thud of busy picks and the ring of spades as the men employed them. Here and there a figure was to be seen standing up in the open, while everywhere else that column of men which had filed past them had, as it were, disappeared, or almost so; for already, thanks to the soft nature of the ground and to the rain which had fallen, the men had dug almost two feet down, and were partially hidden.

"Halt! Who are you? Why are you not working in the trenches?"

The question was bellowed at them by one of those figures standing out above the trenches, and, obedient to the order, losing their heads, indeed, for just one brief moment, Henri and Jules halted.

"Run for it!" whispered Henri; "straight through the line and on into the darkness! Come, Jules!"

Without a pause, without venturing to answer the question shouted at them, the two at once took to their heels, and, darting in between the men labouring at the trenches, sped on into the darkness. Nor was there any great attempt to arrest them; for, indeed, the men had already thrown off their tunics and had piled their arms, so that the only individuals carrying weapons were the officers superintending the operations. Half a dozen revolver-shots, therefore, were all that were fired at them, and those went wide in the darkness. Within a few minutes, in fact, the two were secure from all pursuit, and, provided there were no advance-parties thrown out in front of the Germans, might hope to reach their friends without further incident.

"But it is more than likely that pickets will have been posted, so as to avoid a French surprise," said Henri, "and, although I cannot claim much acquaintance with German

methods as yet, one can imagine that sentries also have been sent towards our positions. Let's go on in silence, listening every now and again."

Stealing on through the darkness, they passed on more than one occasion a ghostly figure standing erect and motionless, keeping guard against the surprise of his comrades digging those trenches lower down the slope. Once, also, a figure suddenly sprang up before them—the figure of a German scout—a diminutive individual, who, not unnaturally, took them for comrades instantly.

"What now?" he said, standing within five feet of them. "Reliefs, or an advance-party in front of the main force? Surely not that, for it's time for us all to have a little rest, after the fighting we have experienced."

"Reliefs!" Henri told him instantly. "You are to return and report at the trenches. Go now, for we have fed, and no doubt you are hungry."

"Hungry?" The man almost exploded at the words. "Hungry? I am as empty as a drum," he told them. "But there, you have come to relieve me, so good-bye!"

He swung off at once into the darkness, and, waiting till he had gained perhaps a hundred yards, Henri and Jules sped on again towards the French lines, and, clambering up the steeper slopes of the Côte du Poivre, were finally challenged.

"Halte! Qui va la?"

"Friends!" they answered.

"Then advance one—without arms."

It was with a shout of joy that their comrades welcomed them back to the trenches, and almost immediately they were sent along to report to the Commander, receiving his congratulations on their safe return.

"This is information of the greatest importance," he told the two when he had listened to their story; "though, to tell the truth, the movement the enemy are making has been expected and even anticipated. Go and get a meal at once, while I report what is passing. But let me say that you have behaved wonderfully well, my Jules and my Henri, and your Commander will not forget to mention the matter. Adieu! To-morrow we shall see something more of those movements."

Yes, to-morrow! For as the 24th February dawned, and the grey light broke over the slopes of the Côte du Poivre, the Hill of Talou, and the winding Meuse gliding along between the hills which formed the main French positions to the west and to the east of it, the enemy guns, which had not rested for many hours since the outbreak of this gigantic conflict, broke out with terrific energy and commenced to deluge the French positions.

Then, down on the lower slopes, on that plain and in the hollows, thousands and thousands of Germans sprang to their feet and dashed forward.

Henri and Jules and their comrades were, indeed, on this day, and upon those which followed, to experience fighting beside which that which had taken place on the 21st, 22nd, and 23rd February had been almost child's play—a grim, furious struggle was about to open, in which hand-to-hand contests were to be almost general, and in which that sturdy handful of *poilus* were to be called upon to make yet again the most gallant efforts.

CHAPTER XIII

Douaumont Fortress

"They come! See them, in their thousands! They are breaking from the trees and the hollows!"

"Thousands of them! Hordes of them! Swarms of the Boches!"

Amidst the storm of shells which the German massed guns were pouring upon that narrow front stretching from the Côte du Poivre past the Côte De Talou to the River Meuse, heads popped up from battered trenches, from shell craters, from fissures torn in the ground by high explosives, and hardy, bristly, dirty *poilus*, stared down the slopes through the wintry light and watched the enemy approaching. That gallant band indeed, sadly thinned since the opening of the Verdun battle—a battle destined to last longer than any recorded in all history—looked on grimly and waited. Waited expectantly, not in fear and terror lest they should be decimated, not even in doubt or trembling, for the desperate conflict which had been waged so far had taught the French one thing very thoroughly—man for man, they were as good as, nay better than the Germans; gun for gun, their own artillery was at least as dexterous and as exact in its ranging, and, so far as it went, gave wonderful support to the infantry. All then that remained was to withstand that terrible torrent of shells, and wait. To discover shelter of some sort which would protect their bodies and allow them to remain alive till that moment when those grey masses down below got within reach of them.

"And then you shall see, my Henri and my Jules," the sergeant who had spoken up for them on the previous day said, smiling grimly. "These shells that fall about us—pooh! What are they?"

At that moment a 15-inch shell plunged into the ground just behind the parapet—into ground already torn and plastered with shell fragments—and, burrowing at least ten feet

deep, at last exploded with a muffled roar, setting the earth trembling, shaking in the sides of the battered trench, and sending up tons of soil, which fell in a cascade all round them.

"Poof! What are they?" he said again, saluting in the direction of the exploded shell. "But nothing! But something to snap one's fingers at! To laugh at! To chortle over! Something to avoid, though, my Henri and my Jules! Not that a man is so careful of his body in these days. Though he is anxious to retain his life, yet not for himself only, not that he shall live on to see the end of this warfare and the victory of the Allies. No, no! But so that he shall live to pull a trigger as the enemy draws nearer, and so help to destroy the German effort."

You would have thought, to look at Jules's face, that he was listening to quite a merry conversation; for that young man was smiling broadly, and, though shells still pitched about them, though many a shrapnel-burst high overhead plastered the ground with bullets, even twitted his comrades. But Henri was stern and severe, and even looked a trifle nervous: such was the difference in their characters. Yet Jules knew, the Sergeant knew, all his comrades knew, that when it came to the pinch, when it came to close fighting, there was no one more to be trusted than the sterner of these two young fellows. Ducking now and again, for somehow he could not help it, turning his eyes anxiously every few minutes in the direction of the enemy, his fingers locking themselves about his rifle and toying nervously with the buttons of his tunic, Henri did indeed, at that moment, look ill at ease, to say the least of it. And yet he too smiled as that shell burst, and, turning a moment later, smiled once more as he pointed towards the enemy.

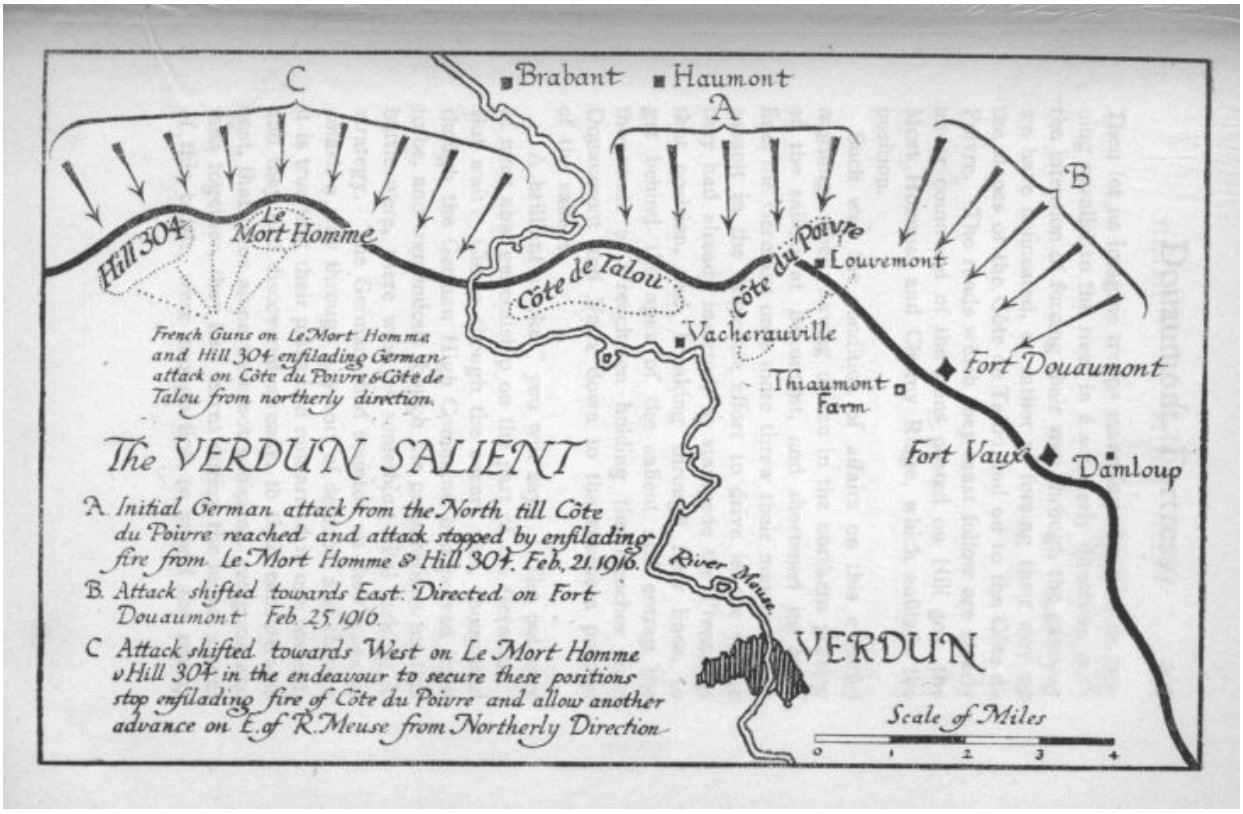
"Wait!" he told Jules and the Sergeant. "They give us shells here in plenty, those Boches, they keep a torrent of them tumbling about our ears both day and night; but wait, I say! For remember what we saw from the forest, Jules! Those masses down below, the village of Vacherauville and the road to it, the slopes of the Côte de Poivre and of the Côte de Talou, are enfiladed by our guns across the river. Wait then! The gunners have not opened yet, but when the word comes, such a storm of shell will be poured upon the Germans that they too will learn what shell-fire really means."

His words, indeed, proved to be almost prophetic, for though, for some few minutes longer, the thinned garrison of the French trenches in those parts waited and watched the enemy masses advance, almost unobstructed, yet in a little while, and very soon after the machine-gunners had got into action and rifles were speaking sharply from every direction, there came sudden salvoes from across the river, from Charny Ridge, from the hill of Mort Homme, and from that of 304—high ground, in fact, almost continuous with the Hill of Talou. Taking a bird's-eye view of this particular position of the salient of Verdun, one sees the River Meuse flowing from south to north, winding in big bends through the hills which bound the valley, while, on those same hills to west and east of the river, eminences project which form the positions with which we are dealing. Running almost due east and west, there are Hill 304 and the Mort Homme, with Charny Ridge closer to the river and overlooking it. Then comes a flattened piece of land which is

marshy in the winter, and through which the river winds, forming a big bend, and flowing in that part in an east-and-westerly direction. At Vacherauville—lying close to the eastern bank of the river—the next outcrop on the banks of the Meuse is the Côte de Talou, and, still east of it, the Côte du Poivre, while a little farther east, in the neighbourhood of Louvemont, the heights sweep round abruptly to the south to Douaumont, and then to Vaux, towards which those outlying parties of French who had held on so stubbornly to Herbebois, Ornes, and Maucourt, and had retired towards Bezonvaux, were now being driven by the enemy.

A glance at the sketch attached will show at once that the hills we have mentioned to the west or left of the River Meuse, and those to the right, form, as it were, a gateway through which the river passes, entering the gateway at Vacherauville and emerging at Cumières, where a wood and a village nestle close to the river.

Then let us imagine troops marching along roads running parallel to the river in a southerly direction, with the intention of forcing their way through the gateway we have delineated, or rather of forcing their way up the slopes of the Côte de Talou and on to the Côte du Poivre. The roads which they must follow are clearly under command of the guns posted on Hill 304, the Mort Homme, and Charny Ridge, which enfilade the position.


C
Brabant
Haumont
A
B
Hill 304
Le Mort Homme
Côte de Talou
Côte du Poivre
Louvemont
Vacherauville
Fort Douaumont
Thiaumont Farm
Fort Vaux
Damloup
French Guns on Le Mort Homme and Hill 304 enfilading German attack on Côte du Poivre & Côte de Talou from northerly direction.
The VERDUN SALIENT
A. Initial German attack from the North till Côte du Poivre reached and attack stopped by enfilading fire from Le Mort Homme & Hill 304. Feb. 21. 1916.
B. Attack shifted towards East. Directed on Fort Douaumont Feb. 25. 1916.
C. Attack shifted towards West on Le Mort Homme & Hill 304 in the endeavour to secure these positions stop enfilading fire of Côte du Poivre and allow another advance on E. of R. Meuse from Northerly Direction
River Meuse
VERDUN
Scale of Miles
0 1 2 3 4

MAP OF VERDUN SALIENT AFTER FOUR MONTHS OF CONTINUOUS FIGHTING

Such was the condition of affairs on this eventful morning, when, having driven in the northern portion of the salient at Beaumont, and shortened its baseline, the Germans once more threw their masses to the assault in the desperate effort to drive in the wedge they had already inserted, to stampede the French at that position, and, breaking through their lines, to get behind the apex of the salient and entrap the thousands of Frenchmen holding the trenches from Douaumont and Vaux down to the southern portion of the salient.

"A brilliant stroke!" you will say. "The outcome of most able generalship on the part of the Germans." But wait! Clever though the enemy was, thoughtful though the German High Command had proved itself to be, and tremendous though the preparations for this battle were, there was yet something vital lacking in strategy. The Germans had counted on their guns to smash a way through any sort of defence, and though it is true that their plans had miscarried in one respect, and they had discovered already, to their considerable cost, that guns alone were not sufficient, yet guns and men together, they had learnt during the initial stages of this battle, were enough first to pound the enemy trenches, and then to drive out the defenders. Reckoning now upon a similar course of events, and, having already pounded the French position, they launched on this morning hosts of grey-coated infantry at the Hills of Talou and Poivre, above which Henri and Jules were fighting.

Posted on an eminence in the neighbourhood of Samogneux, the German High Command, safe from the rifle-fire of the French, watched through their glasses as those sinister lines of grey swept from the wood in which they had been taking cover, and, marching steadily over the ground, advanced upon their objective. And then they too heard that sudden salvo of guns from across the river, and, turning their glasses, surveyed the Mort Homme and Hill 304, positions to which they had given but little consideration.

And see the result! 75's, machine-guns, howitzers, and rifles, all concealed, all dug in or sheltered, and all amply provided with ammunition, poured a storm of shot and shell and bullets upon those advancing grey masses, sweeping them away, shattering the ranks, treating them to a hail of steel beside which the fire of the defenders of the higher slopes of the hill the Germans were attacking was but as a shower compared with a tornado. German infantry melted away under that terrible storm, masses of grey were levelled like corn at the feet of the reaper, while even the forest, through which Henri and Jules had penetrated on the previous day, was flattened or torn to shreds, was converted into a species of smoking volcano. It was terrific! It was a master-stroke on the part of the French Command, and a shattering misfortune to the enemy. Indeed, it took the sting out of their attack entirely; it sent those of their men who had survived this awful ordeal racing back to cover; and it put a peremptory and sudden stop to the cunning German effort to drive in that wedge they had already inserted along the Meuse and so to shorten dangerously the base of the Verdun salient.

"Fall in, men, fall in! We are going to move from the position, handing it over to others of our comrades. Fall in there, men!"

"A move!" ejaculated Jules. "Then where to?"

Henri shrugged his shoulders.

"Anywhere—who cares?" he declared, with a species of desperation. "There's fighting all round, so one place is neither worse nor better than another. But there's one thing that is quite apparent; men are hardly wanted here any longer, and a thin sprinkling of our soldiers can hold these trenches quite as easily as hosts of them. For the guns yonder, those guns on Mort Homme and 304, command the Côte de Talou and the Côte du Poivre far better than could our rifles; so our commanders, who no doubt want men in other places; are thinning out our lines and are sending us to reinforce another portion of the salient."

Creeping along the battered trenches, crawling across masses of tumbled earth, where communication-trenches had once existed, and, by slow degrees, moving to a part where a fold in the ground gave some shelter, though little enough, from the shells which the German guns still sent, the depleted regiment to which Henri and Jules belonged was finally massed in the hollow, and, having been fed there and rested for a while, was marched to the east, towards the fort of Douaumont. That night, indeed, after darkness had fallen, they once more repeated the process of scrambling along shattered trenches, and when the morning of the 25th dawned—a cold and bitter morning with snow-flakes filling the air and whirling across the landscape—they found themselves looking down the steep slopes of the plateau of Douaumont, towards the German positions, and watching, spellbound almost, another demonstration of the power and skill of the German gunners.

"Yes, my friends, they have been at that for hours past," a comrade lying beside them in the trenches told them, as he pointed a finger at the dull-grey outline of Douaumont fort, lying not so far from them. "Believe me, one would have thought, from the number of shells they have fired at the place, that there were thousands of Frenchmen sheltering there whom they hoped to destroy completely. And so they have dropped shells on the place, big shells—Mon Dieu! as big as I am—middle-sized ones, and small ones—in fact, grandfathers, fathers, and children—till the place has been pounded to atoms.

"And so you have come at last, you fellows," he went on when the three had watched, for a while, more shells hurtling into the ruins of Douaumont fort. "Well, you are wanted, wanted badly, for we've fought our way back from Ornes and Bezonvaux, and there are precious few of us left to do more fighting. You are fresh at the game—eh? my comrades."

"Fresh!" ejaculated Jules, looking quite indignant.

"Bien! But I hardly meant that," the *poilu* told them. "In appearance you are not fresh. No, certainly not; far from it. But then, who of us can turn out nicely under such circumstances? Look at me, I ask you; a mere mud-heap. And so I have been since the battle commenced. And you?"

"And we," laughed Henri, "we are in a similar sort of position. But what would you?" he declared, shrugging his shoulders in truly French fashion. "For listen, mon ami! Like you, we have fought our way back from Brabant, from the lines stretching along past Herbebois and Ornes. We have been in the thick of the fighting, hiding in caves deep down in the earth, in dug-outs which shook as the enemy shells burst above them, crawling from shot-hole to shell-crater, living in earth battered and shaken all day and all night, and thankful to get an hour's sleep at any time, and a bite and a drink to keep us going. 'Fresh,' did you say? Certainly, mon ami, we are fresh, if by fresh you mean we are willing and ready for more fighting."

"Bravo!"

The *poilu*, his mouth wide open in a huge grin, gripped Henri's hand and shook it heartily.

"Mais! Mon Dieu! That is your sort! That is our sort! That is the French sort!" he cried loudly. "It's that kind of spirit which will carry us on, and which will help us to beat these fellows. Then I was right, you are 'fresh' men who have come to reinforce us, and badly do we need your assistance."

Pulling their coats about them, turning up their collars so as to keep out the whirling flakes of snow, beating their arms about their bodies and stumbling up and down the trenches, the troops watching on the heights above Douaumont, dodging the German shells still flung at them, waited as the 25th February grew gradually older, and the light grew stronger. Something in the air seemed to tell them that this was to be a sterner day than any that had preceded it, and yet there was that about the artillery-fire of the enemy which rather contradicted that feeling. For while everything up to the 24th of the month had gone in the favour of Germany, and while she had gained enormous successes—thanks to her long-continued and secretly-made preparations—yet now the elements themselves turned against her—and in all conscience she had had difficulties enough before, considering the terrific resistance shown by those French heroes. It was snowing, banks of snow-clouds filled the heavens, while whirling flakes made artillery-fire a matter of extreme difficulty. True, big guns, long since established on concrete foundations and quite immobile, could still register by the map as accurately as ever, and still poured shells of large dimensions on Fort Douaumont and on other sectors; but the smaller guns, mere babes compared with those 17-inch howitzers, yet guns flinging missiles which pounded the French trenches, could now only fire aimlessly, so that the torrent of shells was reduced and became a mere nothing to that formerly experienced.

"They will not attack," a *poilu* gave it as his decision, and very decidedly. "These Boches never attack unless they have first cut up the ground and smashed our trenches; therefore I vote for a brazier here, something to cook, and a pipe of good tobacco."

"And perhaps a game of manne, too," laughed another. "Well, a little rest, after what we have gone through, will do us no harm, and will fit us all the more for what is to

follow. Who cares! To-day, to-morrow, or even later, we shall fight. If not to-day, well, let us make the most of it."

Cheery groups collected in the trenches all along the line, men who hardly took the trouble to peer out over the parapets and watch for the coming of the enemy. It looked, indeed, as if this 25th February was to be a day of rest—one sorely needed by our allies. And then, of a sudden, an alarm spread along the trenches; men sprang to their arms and gripped their rifles, while machine-gunners dived into cunning approaches to hidden pieces out in the open, and, scuttling along, manned those instruments which were to send death into the ranks of the Kaiser.

For the enemy were not to be denied, were not to be put off even though the elements were against them. Realizing now that guns alone were insufficient, that losses must be sustained if they desired to capture Verdun and its salient, they had hardened their hearts, and, determined to risk all in this venture (for part of their success, if they captured Verdun, would consist in the rapidity of such capture), now launched the Brandenburg Corps against the Douaumont position, convinced that if only they could capture what remained of the shattered fort, and set foot on this upland plateau, they would command the French positions along the heights of the Meuse, would command, indeed, those guns, posted on Mort Homme and Hill 304, which had assailed them so severely on the previous day, and would thereby easily smash up further French resistance and gain their objective.

"Stand to your arms! Watch the ravines! For we have news that the enemy are advancing up them. Hold your ground at all cost, no matter what your losses, for these are the orders."

Without haste, without excitement, with that grim, steady courage which had stood the French *poilu* in such good stead already, the men gripped their rifles and made ready for another German onslaught.

"Hold on, whatever the cost!" one man repeated to another.

"Till death, if need be," came the answer.

CHAPTER XIV

Frenchmen and Brandenburgers

Forbidding and grey, shell-marked and shattered and battered out of all recognition, yet of such a substantial nature that even the high explosives and the ponderous shells dropped upon it by the German gunners could not entirely demolish it, the fort of Douaumont stood up, cold and black, on that morning of Friday, the 25th February, seeming even to overshadow the trench, or the apology for a trench—for here, too, shells had done their work—in which Henri and his friend were lying. Out beyond them the shell-marked ground, across which flakes of snow were drifting, descended abruptly to the plain of the Woevre; and struggling up its slopes came, at that moment, the 5th Division of the 3rd Brandenburg Corps—a corps retired from the fighting-ranks months ago, specially fed, specially trained and armed, and prepared particularly for this Verdun fighting. Its 6th Division was, at the moment, invisible, for it was creeping up the ravine of La Voche, which sheltered it from the fire of the French defenders.

There is no need for us to repeat the tale of terrific fighting, of the stubbornness and gallantry of the Germans, and of the heroic resistance of that thin band of French *poilus* who still held the main outposts of the Verdun salient. Let us but say that they had been driven in four miles from the northern posts they had held, and on the east had been forced to fall back via Bezonvaux. But those positions had been but flimsily held, but indifferently fortified, when compared with the main defensive positions arranged by our allies. They were back upon that main defensive line now, where it swept from Vacherauville, on the River Meuse, opposite the Mort Homme and Hill 304, across the hill of Talou and Pepper Hill—ominous names already to the enemy—past Louvemont, and so to Douaumont and Damloup, where the trenches had now descended to the plain of the Woevre, and they held to it till they clambered once more up the slopes, and so to the other end of the base of the salient.

Checked on their right, where the 5th Division was advancing, the Brandenburgers were swept from the face of the earth by a tempest of shot and shell; but their 6th Division, advancing up the ravine in front of the shattered fortress, finally burst from cover, and, supported by a torrent of projectiles from the German guns, hurled itself from a close point upon the French defences, and, in spite of the heroic resistance of these soldiers, forced them back.

It was at that particular period that Henri and Jules and a dozen or more of their comrades found themselves in a portion of the fire-trench cut off from their comrades, who had retreated, and already almost surrounded by Germans.

"It's all up! We are surrounded! We are captured! Vive la France!" shouted one of their number; while others looked about them, at first doubtfully, and then with grim resignation.

"Yes, captured! Better lie down in the trench till we are discovered, or else those Huns will fire into us," counselled another of the men.

"And give in like that!" shouted Jules indignantly. "Give in without trying to crawl back to our people?"

"Crawl back!" a corporal answered him hotly. "As if we shouldn't do that if it were possible. Look for yourself, man; you've eyes in your head. See the lines of Brandenburgers between us and our people!"

As a matter of fact, just at the moment when he was pointing to a thick though somewhat scattered line of grey-coated infantry which had now swept on beyond them, a gust of wind came whirling round the corner of the shattered fortress, singing and whistling over the summit, and bringing with it heavier flakes of snow which obliterated the scene about them and made vision almost impossible.

"Well, then!" added the heated Corporal. "Even snow won't help us; for we don't belong to the Flying Corps, and can't, therefore, very well ascend and drop beyond them."

"But——" exclaimed Henri, who had been using his wits and his eyes all this time, and, though bound to feel somewhat helpless, seeing the position in which he and his comrades found themselves, was yet not quite resigned to the idea of becoming a prisoner. ("Not much!" he told himself. "I've had some!—as they say in America. Ruhleben was a lesson which has taught me that the lot of a prisoner is hardly inviting.") "But——" he called out.

"But——" shouted the Corporal back at him, standing quite close to Henri, and bellowing in his ear; for, indeed, the little fellow was very excited. "But you would like to call us cowards next, because we will not charge after the Germans."

"One moment," Henri said, patting him on the shoulder, "one little moment, mon cher ami! Neither you nor I wish to be prisoners, eh?"

"Vraiment!" the little fellow answered, a trifle mollified, his anger oozing out at the tips of his fingers. "But then—— Ah! It is Henri, eh? I did not recognize you earlier. Then what do you advise, Henri—you, who have tasted prison life in Germany?"

"Yes, yes! Let Henri tell us," called a number of the others; for already our hero had won no small reputation amongst his fellows.

Let us advance the story just a little and explain that already that officer to whom Henri and Jules had given a report of their reconnaissance had urged upon his colonel that they should be promoted instantly, and even then, as the conflict raged about Fort Douaumont, their names were in Regimental Orders. They were to be "non-commissioned" officers.

"What then?" the little Corporal asked again, eagerly peering up at Henri, for he was some inches shorter.

"I believe you, my dear fellow," exclaimed Henri. "Not being a bird, or, as you rightly observed, not belonging to the Flying Corps, we cannot very well get back to our fellows, that is, not yet. But—and that is just where you chipped in and prevented my saying what was in my mind—but we fellows might manage to hold out if we had some sort of decent cover."

"Aye! Cover—that's it! Out here we should be shot to rags," exclaimed a veteran. "Now, Henri, let's have your decision, and quickly, too, for the snow may stop at any moment."

"Then here it is: take up every cartridge you can find—boxes of ammunition if you can hit on them—get as much food from the haversacks of the killed as you can carry, and then let's creep towards the fort. There's a gateway on this side, for I noticed it in the early hours of the morning. Let's get behind those concrete and stone walls and search for a spot where we can hold out and stand a siege till our fellows counter-attack and relieve us."

The veteran *poilu* of the party smote his hands together and tilted his steel helmet backward.

"Mon Dieu," he cried, "but that is it! Our Henri has thought of a splendid thing for us. Ecoutez! Then I will tell you, I who have been of the Verdun garrison, not only during this war, but in peace times, I who helped to remove the big guns when the Kaiser showed us that guns behind a fort were no longer useful. There are caverns underneath that masonry, my boys, big galleries, and fortified chambers, to which even a big shell will hardly descend. Yes, there are rooms down below in the bowels of the earth which will shelter us, and hundreds beside us. It is a magnificent plan. I, who know the place, can lead you; and, of a truth, we will find a spot where men such as we are, fighting for France, can hold up a hundred of the enemy. Be busy, then! Pick up cartridges, seek for food and water."

"Yes—and water!" shouted Jules, darting from the trench and stooping over the nearest figure. All about them were the battered trenches of that thin force of noble Frenchmen who had fought hand to hand with the Brandenburgers. There were the bodies of the slain—of friend and foe—lying in every sort of posture, some half in and half out of the trenches; some, alas! unrecognizable, for such is the effect of high explosives; and others, yet again, almost buried already by upheavals of earth as shells burst close beside them. There were not a few wounded, too, who lay waiting the succour which might come some hours hence, and which, it was quite possible, might never come, for in a little while, no doubt, French fire would command the ground on which they lay, and neither troops nor hospital bearers could cross it.

Very eagerly, then, for every one of the men in Henri's party was anxious to escape capture, and eager to rejoin the French forces and again fight the Germans, the *poilus* scrambled about in the battered trench, or closely adjacent to it, taking up cartridges, despoiling the dead of their haversacks, from which they ejected all but the food contents,

while every man loaded himself with as many water-bottles as he could conveniently carry.

"It's still snowing hard," said Henri, when some ten minutes had passed and the band was again collected. "Don't let us get into a flurry, or spoil our chances by being too hurried. Let's number off, and see how many we are."

"One! Two! Three!"——

Without a word of command the man on the left started, and Henri, at the far end of the line, announced his own number. It was twenty.

"Good!" he told them. "More than I thought. Twenty resolute men fighting for France, for la belle France, my comrades——"

"Ah! For la belle France, for home, for victory!" the veteran shouted.

"Yes, for victory. And listen, my friends; we may help towards it," Henri told them. "Resolute men, if they can reach some strong position in that fort, may well assist our friends battling farther back on the plateau. Well, now, there are twenty of us, and I see that there are half a dozen or more ammunition-boxes."

"Ten," the veteran corrected him instantly; "ten, Monsieur Henri"—it had come to "Monsieur" now, such was the veteran's opinion of our hero.

"Good! Ten boxes of cartridges is it? Ten thousand rounds. Now let's see to the water-bottles. How many are there?"

The men, on returning to the spot where Henri stood, had at once deposited their finds at the bottom of the trench, so that there was no difficulty in making an inventory; and now a mere glance discovered the fact that there were more than two water-bottles per man, all filled, as Henri was assured, and all big ones.

"One bottle will last a careful man, say, two days, eh?" he asked.

"In the dungeons of the fort, three days, Monsieur Henri," the veteran replied; "and, besides, it's bitterly cold weather, when a man does not need to drink so much."

"And food? Well, we must guess at that; but it appears from the number of haversacks, and from the way in which some of them are bulging, that there will be sufficient for some days."

"One mo'!" called Jules at that instant. "Each man's got his rifle and bayonet, that's understood; there's ammunition, say, for a four-days' fight, and water and food also. Why not a machine-gun? Here's one abandoned by our fellows when they were forced backward."

Some of the men almost burst into a cheer, while two of them dashed forward, and, dismantling the gun, shouldered the tripod and the barrel.

"Good idea!" Henri told him. "The difficulty, though, will be to carry in sufficient ammunition. But listen to this, you fellows; let's make tracks for the fort at once, decide upon a spot to hold, and deposit our belongings; then, if the snow continues and the Germans keep away, we'll creep out again and look for further ammunition."

They began to move off along the trench at once, the veteran and Henri leading, and Jules and the stout little corporal bringing up the rear. Staggering along, loaded with ammunition and water and food which they had collected, bending as low as possible and holding to the trench so long as it continued, the little band were soon directly under the walls of the fort, and though they peered anxiously about them, looking for the enemy, whose shouts, indeed, they could hear in all directions—even from the fort itself—yet not once did one of the Kaiser's soldiers approach them, while all the time the snow fell silently upon the fort and its surroundings. Then the gate seemed suddenly to open in front of them, and marching in—staggering in, indeed, for they were very heavily laden—they followed the veteran into a shattered courtyard, and from it down a flight of steps to a gallery beneath—a wide gallery with earth roof and cemented floor, along which ran steel rails. Indeed, there was a trolley on those rails, over which Henri stumbled.

"A trolley to run the ammunition round to the guns," the veteran exclaimed, "but useless now, my Henri, quite useless," he chuckled. "For, you see, the guns are behind the fort, and have already sent some of their shells into the enemy."

"That being so, this trolley will do to carry our produce. Pile your ammunition here. That's it. Those ammunition-boxes will weigh less heavily on you when stacked on this trolley. Now, my friend, which way? We are in a deep gallery which seems to be lighted by tunnels running to the outside. Do we turn left or right, or whither?"

The veteran turned to his right without a word, while Henri and one of the men followed, pushing the trolley. Following the gallery, which ran straight on for some fifty yards, they came to a point where the inside walls had been rounded, and the rail swept in a gentle curve round the corner and into the extension of the gallery.

"Halt!" shouted the veteran suddenly. "This is the spot that I have aimed for. Now look! On our left is a wide opening which enters the hall in which the garrison could take their meals and sleep, and which can accommodate, perhaps, at a squeeze, a thousand of them. Right opposite this entrance there is a stairway, and at its top another room—one of a series of gun emplacements now empty. It will do for us, my Henri, I believe. Let us ascend."

Taking up the ammunition-boxes at once, and leaving the trolley at the foot of the stairs, the party scrambled upwards till they found themselves in a square chamber lit by an embrasure in the wall, through which the wintry rays percolated. Standing just at the

entrance, and turning round, Henri discovered that, thanks to the height of the opening into the big hall beneath the fort, he was able to look directly into it, though the far end was hidden from view by the stonework at the top. A swift glance round the chamber which they had reached showed him thick masonry all about, steel beams above, and iron rails of circular pattern on the floor, on which the guns had been wont to revolve.

"Well, then?" asked the veteran.

"It will do," Henri told him. "But what we shall want is someone to discover something with which to barricade the top of these stairs. Let us divide ourselves into three parties. Jules, you will command one, our friend the corporal another, and this bearded chum of ours the third. Now, listen."

"Yes, listen to him, to our Henri," cried the veteran. "For it's agreed, is it not, my comrades, that he shall command us?"

"Certainly!" they all shouted.

"Then, here is the plan: our bearded friend stays here and sends a portion of his command about the place to discover sacks of grain, blocks of stone or of timber, anything, in fact, which will allow us to build a wall across the top of the stairs. Jules and his men will descend the stairs and hunt round the fort, while our corporal and his party will retrace their footsteps, pushing the trolley with them, and will bring in to us as much food and as much small-arm ammunition as they can find, and then boxes of ammunition for our machine-gun."

The band of resolute *poilus*, whose eyes were now sparkling with excitement, for but a little while before they had resigned themselves to capture by the enemy, now separated, each man bustling about; while the veteran amongst them, Jules, and the corporal, snapped out orders, barked them, indeed, and sent their willing men flying. As for Henri, he went hither and thither, first watching one lot of men and then another; and, as they worked, as the veteran and his men sought for obstacles, and by lucky chance found them —for it happened that the French had stored sacks of grain for their transport animals in one of the chambers—while Jules and his men reconnoitred their surroundings, and the corporal, moving very swiftly and with intelligence, returned more than once laden with supplies from outside, the snow-flakes still whirled about the place, still enveloped the fort of Douaumont, to obtain which the Germans had now spent so many lives—spent the lives of their men indeed like water—and which they now almost surrounded.

Shells shrieked overhead, sent from those guns long since embedded in concrete, down under shelter of the evergreen fir-trees surrounding the salient of Verdun, while other shells, smaller missiles, shrieked and exploded as they hurled their way hither and thither, cast at random now, for the thick weather made shooting almost impossible. There came, too, through that embrasure, or through the gateway of the fort, every now and again, the rattle of rifles, the sharp tap-tap of machine-guns, and the snap and bark of the

soixante-quinze as the French sent their curtain-fire out beyond the plateau. There was fighting still to the left and to the right of the fort, in the neighbourhood of Thiaumont farm and the village of Douaumont, while to the right, towards Vaux, the flash of weapons was sometimes visible. More than that, voices could be heard near at hand, the shouts of Frenchmen somewhere, either in the fort or closely adjacent to it, and presently the calls, the loud commands, of Germans.

It was, indeed, only half an hour later, when, thanks to the time given to them, Henri's little command had stacked the chamber with an ample supply of food and water, and procured such quantities of ammunition that they might fire it almost all day long and yet have sufficient for a week, that a terrific explosion shook the fortress, a huge German shell having burst almost within it. The far wall of that hall into which Henri had looked, and which faced the bottom of the stairs giving access to their chamber, fell in with a crash and clatter, the semi-darkness existing there being made denser at once by the dust and debris shot out by the explosion. Then figures raced across the hall, the figures of Frenchmen, coming from some point beyond, where Jules and his party had failed to discover them, while, quickly following them, could be seen German infantry—men of the Brandenburg Corps.

"Up here, up here!" shouted Henri, dashing down the stairs at once, and calling to the men running towards him. "Here are friends; come up the stairs and join us."

In rapid succession those men dashed through the opening of the hall, leapt up the stairs three at a time, and were dragged over the parapet which the veteran *poilu* had had erected. Then Henri retreated slowly, and, having rejoined his friends, sat down, rifle in hand, to see what would happen.

"Tell me," he asked one of the men who had just joined their ranks, and who was gasping for breath near him, "what has happened?"

"What has happened? Ah! They have driven our folks back from the fort, which is now isolated. We were holding on—I and perhaps a hundred of my comrades—near the eastern end, and then the Germans, having blasted the corner of the fort to pieces with that last shot, charged from some trenches in which they were lying, within a hundred metres perhaps, and burst their way into the place. We could not hold on any longer. It was a case of flight, or death, or capture."

"And so you chose flight! Good!" said Henri. "We chose the same. Here we are, snug in this place, with plenty of ammunition, and ready and eager to continue fighting. If any of you men understand a machine-gun, get to the one we have, at once, and man it; the rest, who have no rifles, can assist in any way that appeals to them. Ah! Watch those fellows. They are streaming into the hall. There are fifty—more—perhaps a hundred of them."

There were indeed considerably more of the Brandenburgers to be seen when the dust from that shattered wall had subsided. They came streaming in to the darkened hall, dishevelled, their *Pickelhaubes* gone in many cases, their rifles missing, their grey clothing now a mass of caked mud, and their hands and faces of the same colour. Shouting and bellowing their triumph, they massed in the room till an officer made himself apparent.

"Those men? Those Frenchmen who passed before us?" he asked in the arrogant manner of the Prussian; "you killed them—eh?"

"No! They went on ahead of us, up those stairs yonder," one of the men answered.

"Then no doubt they are cut off, like rats in a trap. Go in and kill them."

Henri turned and whispered to his friends.

"You heard that?" he asked them. "But perhaps you do not speak German. Then I will translate; they say they have us here like rats in a trap, and the order has been passed to come and kill us. Well, personally, I have a great objection to being killed, and I have every wish indeed to kill our enemies. Get ready! Load! Two hundred Germans shan't turn us out of these quarters."

CHAPTER XV

Rats in a Trap

Douaumont Fort was captured. But for that handful of men who had nominated Henri as their leader, and who crouched behind the parapet of grain-bags at the summit of the narrow flight of steps within the fort, not a Frenchman remained to defend it. The "pillar of the defence of Verdun", as the Kaiser and his War Staff had termed it, was in their hands, and at once the news was flashed broadcast across the States of Germany and to every neutral country.

"Douaumont has fallen. We hold the fortress firmly in our hands. The resistance of the French before Verdun is almost broken, and in a short time we shall capture that city."

That was the gist of the *communiqué* issued to the world—a *communiqué* which set the people of Germany, at this time rendered anxious and despondent by the position in which they found themselves, rejoicing and flying flags. For, indeed, they needed some sort of encouragement. To east and west, and on the seas in all directions, the Central Empires were hemmed in by a line of soldiers, steadily growing stronger, and by ships of

the British Fleet which daunted those of the Germans. True, at this date, looking at the map of Europe, the Kaiser might crow and ask his people to behold the conquests their troops and those of Austria and Bulgaria had gained for them. There was the greater part of Belgium, all but that thin strip running from Ypres to Dunkirk; there was Luxembourg, that little State which had been captured without even protest; there were the north-eastern provinces of France, rich in iron ore and coal and iron industries; and to the east there was the whole of Serbia; while all Poland and a respectable slice of the Tsar's dominions were in his possession.

"See how we have succeeded! Behold our conquests; won for us by the blood and bravery of our soldiers!" the Kaiser had often called to his people.

And yet that was only one side of the picture. Territorial gains had no doubt been obtained—territorial gains of no mean dimensions; but, as we have inferred, and as the War Staffs of Austria and Germany knew well enough, the troops of the Allied Powers were unbeaten, were getting stronger every day, while those of the Central Powers were becoming less numerous; and more than that—far more perhaps—was the fact that trade for the Central Powers had ceased altogether. Nothing might come to either of these countries that did not first pass inspection by the ships of the British fleet; and, as a consequence, food-stuffs, raw material, everything, in fact, had practically ceased to enter the country. Thus food was short: bread was hardly obtainable, though a substitute had been invented; while meat was a luxury to be enjoyed only by the richest. Yes, the condition of affairs in Germany and Austria was none too exhilarating, and Austrians and Germans alike needed some stimulus—something to hearten them, to keep up their spirits and their courage. And here was stimulus indeed. The fort of Douaumont was captured—that fort which they had been led to believe was heavily armed, was deemed impregnable indeed, and the capture of which was a feat almost impossible of achievement, had fallen to the valour of the Germans, to the valour indeed of the Brandenburgers. What then could prevent the fall of Verdun itself? That indeed would compensate them for the hunger they suffered, and for the cruel losses the French were inflicting upon their soldiers.

And but for Henri's little band, as we have said, the fortress of Douaumont was captured.

"See them down in the hall, Henri, mon garçon," said the bearded veteran, who crouched beside our hero, and who, indeed, seemed to have taken him under his own particular protection—not that Henri needed much protection from anyone, for at that moment as he sat there in command of his detachment, he looked as resolute and capable a young fellow as one might wish to meet.

"Yes, they are there, mon ami," he replied. "I see them, and, moreover, they too see us. We shall hear from them shortly."

And hear from the Brandenburgers Henri and his party presently did. For an officer dragged a much-soiled handkerchief from his pocket and picked his way, over the

tumbled masses of masonry littering the floor of the hall beyond, towards the exit which gave access to the stairs. Dapper and smart to a certain extent, though somewhat dishevelled by the charge in which he had taken a share; arrogant, like the majority of German officers, and bearing about his figure something which seemed familiar to Henri, he stopped at that exit, and, looking up the stairway, peered hard at the enemy.

"Above, there!" he called, and Henri and Jules instantly recognized his voice.

"Our friend of Ruhleben—the fellow who was so anxious to shoot us the other day when we tumbled into his bivouac in the forest. Well, the shooting will not be all on one side now," grinned Jules, his lips close to Henri's ear, as they both peered over the top of the barricade.

"Above, there!" the German officer snapped again. "Ah! You will not answer, then; though I know well enough that Frenchmen are there. Well, let it be so! But don't say that I have not warned you. I give you one minute to come down and surrender—after that, I will blow you to pieces."

"How very violent!" laughed Jules, and his voice, reaching the ear of that German officer, sent the blood flushing to his cheeks and his feet stamping with rage. "How very violent! 'Pon my word, Henri, this fellow needs a lesson, for every time we've listened to him he's been going to do something desperate—something desperate, that is, to other people. Shall we answer the beggar?"

"Yes. We'll do the square thing. A moment ago I had a mind to remain quite still and silent, and let the fellow find out for himself what sort of a place we had got; but we'll be quite fair with him, and then there can't be any complaints. Hallo, below there!" he called; "stand where you are, and don't move forward or one of my men will shoot you. You ask us to surrender, eh?"

"Ask you!" came the arrogant answer. "Not at all—I command you!"

"And we take commands only from our own people. Come and take us," Henri told him delightedly. "Come and take us, if you can, but I warn you to look out for the consequences."

The man below turned about with that precision to be found in the ranks of the Kaiser's armies, and strutted back across the hall, his figure lit up by the beams of light entering through shafts by which the chamber was ventilated. In less than a minute he had rejoined his men, and for a while Henri and his friends watched as a consultation was held. Then, of a sudden, the men dispersed and were lost to view for quite five minutes.

It was perhaps five minutes later when first one and then, perhaps, a couple of dozen grey-coated figures slipped into view from behind the tumbled masonry at the far end of

the hall, and, darting to right or to left or down the centre, flopped down behind masses of stone and cement with which the floor was littered.

"Now keep down," Henri told his friends; "or, better still, keep right away from the barricade, and report instantly if bullets contrive to penetrate the sacks. Personally, I don't think they will, for we've piled them up two deep, and a bag of grain affords tremendous opposition even to a sharp-pointed bullet. Ah! There goes the first! Well, has it gone through?"

"No. Nor will any others," the veteran told him, with a chuckle. "We are safe—safer, indeed, behind these bags, than if we had a stone wall before us. For, mon garçon, you understand there will be no ricochetting, no splintering of bullets, no splashes of lead about us."

In a few minutes, as the firing from the hall down below became more general, and thuds on the outer face of the wall of sacks became almost continuous, it was borne in upon Henri and his gallant little band that even bullets discharged at such point-blank range had for the moment little danger for them.

"Then we'll line our wall," said Henri. "It's not more than twelve feet across, so that six men lying flat on their faces will be sufficient for the purpose; six more will kneel down behind them, so as to be ready to fire over the top of the barricade in case of a rush; and our machine-gun man must squeeze himself into the midst of them. Now, man the loopholes!"

It was a canny suggestion of the bearded veteran which had caused the men assisting him to build the barricade to leave loopholes for the rifles of the defenders, not only along the top of this improvised wall, with bags placed so that the heads of those who fired would be protected, but to leave apertures also just a foot from the bottom through which men lying flat on their faces might fire down into the hall. As for the machine-gun, it was piled round with bags, just the bare tip of the muzzle protruding, and, indeed, thanks to the dusk which occluded the top of the stairs, giving no indication of its presence to the enemy. Thus, with the wall manned, and the remainder of his little party squatting on the stone floor of the gun-chamber ready to support their comrades, Henri and his men waited for perhaps half an hour, during which time the fusillade from the men of the 24th Brandenburg Regiment sent a hail of bullets in their direction. They thudded against the bags continuously, while often enough a missile would strike the concrete ceiling of the chamber, and, ricochetting from it, would mushroom against the opposite wall; some even struck the walls limiting the stairway on either side, and, breaking off at a tangent and exploding from the impact, scattered strips of nickel and lead over the heads of the garrison.

"But it is nothing—nothing at all," that bearded veteran told his friends; and, indeed, he was as good as a reinforcement of a hundred men to them—so gay was he, so full of courage, so optimistic. "Poof! Who cares for noise? Not you, my comrades, who have

stood days now when torrents of German shells were pouring on us, when our ears were deafened by the guns of either side. Then who cares for the scream and the hiss of these bullets? They are but a drizzle which follows a storm."

"Get ready to support the others!" Henri commanded of a sudden, having crept forward to the barricade and peered through one of the loopholes. "That officer man is getting impatient, and, if the truth be known, he is beginning to wonder if any of us are left up here; for, remember, we have made no answer."

"An easy shot, eh?" Jules told his chum, gripping the rifle which he had thrust through one of the upper loopholes. "I could bring him down like a bird, as easy as winking! But I won't," he added of a sudden; "no, for that would hardly be fair fighting."

A whistle sounded down in the hall below, and fifty or more grey-coated figures rushed from the far end, where, no doubt, they were waiting out of sight and under shelter. Forming up across the hall, they were given a sharp order, and almost at once dashed forward.

"They are coming!" Henri called softly to his following. "Don't show as much as a finger, if you can help it. Open fire only when they get to the exit from the hall, and cease fire immediately you have checked their dash towards us."

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat! The machine-gun opened with two short bursts just as the Brandenburgers reached the foot of the staircase, while the Frenchmen manning the loopholes opened a furious fire, which first checked the rush of the enemy and then drove the survivors backwards. Indeed, in one minute they were all out of sight, and even those who had been sniping at the barricade had disappeared entirely.

"But it will not be for long; no, my friends," Henri told his party. "That dash is in the form of a reconnaissance, I expect; though, no doubt, they hardly expected to meet with such resistance."

"Bien! We shall hear from them again shortly," Jules laughed; while the bearded veteran banged one broad hand down on his thigh and chuckled loudly.

"Yes, indeed! Yes, indeed! We shall hear from them, and they shall hear from us, and our voices will be as loud as any Prussian's. But, my Henri, though you are already a commander, and have won our hearts, yet your inexperience of command has led you to forget one thing which is essential."

Henri started. Unconsciously he had been carrying on the work just as he would have done had he and Stuart and Jules been alone together; that is to say, he had just done his best, and no one could do more. Then what was it that he had forgotten, this essential point which a commander of experience would certainly not have omitted? He gaped at the veteran, who thereupon laughed and chuckled even more loudly.

"Listen, then, my Henri. You ask us to fight these Boches, to drive them back, to keep them out so that we may hold the fort for France and for Grand-père Joffre, and, of a truth, we would gladly do that. But listen, then. Men must eat to fight, and drink also, to retain their strength; for if men are not strong, how then can they fight as soldiers, my Henri? The hour has come for food, and is there not food and drink here in abundance?"

There were smiles all round at that; and presently the little garrison were seated close behind their barricade, where two men kept watch upon the enemy so that the rest could not be surprised, while the others ate the rations which forethought had caused them to bring into the fort, and took cautious draughts from their store of water. Then, having finished their meal, they drew cigarettes and pipes from their pockets, and presently a thick cloud of smoke almost hid the faces of Henri's detachment, and quite a column of it blew out from the aperture through which the gun, long since removed, had been wont to project its muzzle.

"Begins to look as though they intended to leave us alone, or perhaps they have been driven out of the fortress," said Jules, tiptoeing along from one of the loopholes. "There's not a sound down below, and not a single Prussian has put in an appearance. Perhaps our fellows have come up again, eh? Why not? And may be already above us and all about us."

"No. It is not so," called one of the garrison whom Henri had posted at the gun-embrasure, "for I have been watching here since we came to this chamber. The French troops have been driven back on to the plateau—not far, my friends, you will understand, not very far, but still far enough to take them hopelessly beyond us. No. We are cut off here; and if those Boches have left us alone for a while, and allowed us to enjoy a meal, it is not because they have forgotten. Maybe they are preparing a new attack; perhaps they have been engaged in consolidating their position; in any case, we shall hear from them again, and sooner rather than later."

The attack, when it did come, was indeed sudden and unexpected. A shout came from one of the men watching at the loopholes; and, darting forward, Henri discerned at once numbers of figures, which, dashing from the background, were rushing across the hall towards them. Indeed, half a dozen of the Brandenburgers were already at the exit from the hall, and as he looked through a loophole they leapt on the first step of the stairway.

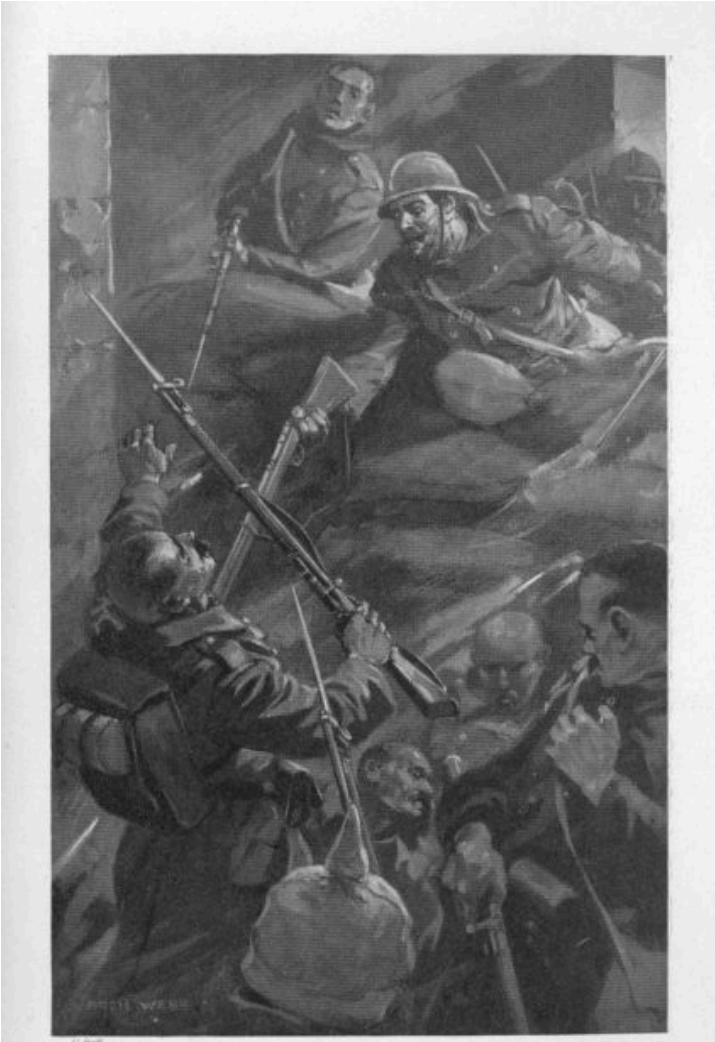
"To your places!" he shouted. "Open fire! Supports get ready to come forward!"

Bang! There was the sharp report of a rifle from down below, a sudden piercing cry, and one of the defenders fell heavily against our hero. An instant later the wall of bags shook while a German bayonet transfixed one of the upper tier, and tore it from its position. Then the machine-gun opened, deafening all within the chamber, lighting by its flash the scene of the conflict; while the men at the loopholes blazed into the lines of Germans who were now swarming on the stairway.

That flimsy wall of bags filled with corn shook and swayed as bodies of frantic Germans, slaughtered by the defenders, fell heavily against it; while one huge Brandenburger who had leapt in advance of his friends, and who had been caught by a bullet fired from one of the loopholes, fixed a dying clutch on the summit of the wall, and held on convulsively for a few moments. Then, with a piercing scream, he fell backwards, carrying with him some two feet of the top of the slender defence which Henri and his friends had erected.

"Man the gap," shouted Henri at once, flinging himself towards the opening, and disentangling himself from another of the defenders who had fallen against him. "Bring bags up from behind and fill in the gap while we defend it."

What a pandemonium there was in that comparatively narrow space up which the stone steps ascended, and across the top of which the barricade of corn-sacks had been erected. Every step was crammed with Brandenburgers, while down below, in the gallery along which the miniature railway ran, which, with its truck, had proved of such service, the exit from the huge hall in the shattered interior of the fort, and that hall itself, were packed with shouting individuals, with men pressing forward to the attack, with fallen soldiers, and with wounded who called in shrill accents to their comrades. Those at the top of the stairs were bellowing with anger, and some with fear; for, forced on by the press from behind, and beaten by the opposition of the Frenchmen, they were, as it were, between two fires, and escape, and even the power of defence, were out of the question. They dropped, indeed, as Henri and his friends fired amongst them; while the bearded veteran, setting a splendid example to his comrades, leapt on to some of the fallen bags, and, leaning over the swaying wall, made havoc amongst the Germans with his bayonet. Then of a sudden the shouts died away, there was a rush of steps on the stairway, and silence—a silence which was almost painful, which seemed to smite the ear of those gallant men holding the gun embrasure and the chamber.



"THAT BEARDED VETERAN, LEANING OVER THE SWAYING WALL, MADE HAVOC AMONG THE GERMANS WITH HIS BAYONET"

THAT BEARDED VETERAN, LEANING OVER THE SWAYING WALL, MADE HAVOC AMONG THE GERMANS WITH HIS BAYONET"

"It was hot work, my Henri, while it lasted," chuckled the bearded *poilu* as he wiped the sweat from his forehead, and stood up after having deposited a fresh bag in its place; "but, mon Dieu! those Brandenburgers fight like the devil! And how they hate us; and how we hate them! Yes, yes! This is a war to the death! This is fighting for France! And only over our bodies shall they advance towards Paris. Comrades, we are holding them back. We here in the remains of this fortress, we are helping to keep the Kaiser's hordes away from the interior of France; helping, too, to rob him of victory and conquest."

Yes, indeed! The violent efforts of these men were helping not a little to check the advance of the enemy, just as the heroic fighting of the French all along the battered

trenches round the salient of Verdun was assisting in defeating the enemy's object. We have said already that the conquest and capture of Verdun alone could be of no particular or material benefit to the Kaiser and his armies. Verdun was, as it were, merely an empty shell, a sleepy old town in the hollow by the River Meuse, overshadowed by heights which formed the major portion of that salient held by our ally. Forts there were in abundance—forts, as we have said, long since dismantled. Yet in Germany the tale spread by the German War Staff, that Verdun was heavily armed and considered impregnable, was thoroughly believed, just as it was confidently believed that the valour of the Kaiser's soldiers would snatch it from the enemy.

This terrible World War had come, at this stage, to a period when the spirits of Germans and Austrians were failing, when some stimulus was sadly needed, and when the courage of the people was hardly what it had been when the conflict opened. Who knows? Who can state with certainty what was the real object of the German War Staff in launching an attack upon such an impregnable position—impregnable not because of those dismantled forts and the guns which had once filled them, but because of the nature of the terrain, those hills with their steep escarpments, and those positions on the left or western bank of the Meuse which gave such splendid opportunity to the defenders to outflank with their guns those attacking the northern portion of the salient. Perhaps a sensational capture of Verdun was the objective of the Germans, merely with the idea that it would act as a stimulus to the peoples of the Central Empires. More likely, finding themselves getting weaker as the months drew on, and terrible losses reduced their fighting effectives, the Kaiser and his war lords were determined to risk all in one mighty effort—an effort which should break through the French line at Verdun, thus bringing kudos to the armies of Prussia, and at the same time demoralizing the French soldiers. Who knows? They may have hoped to dash through the gap thus formed, and once more advance on Paris. In any case, they were well aware of the phenomenal rise in power of the British forces. Five million men had volunteered to fight for king and country; and now, on the top of that, there was news that Great Britain had adopted conscription; every man up to the age of forty-one was to become a soldier, was to fight for that liberty dear to all Britons.

Then, seeing that Germany's forces were rapidly dwindling, a blow must be struck now—a sensational blow—which would, it was hoped, break the power of France before those British reinforcements could reach her. Later, Germany might still have strength to tackle Britain alone; and in that case this risky, if determined, attack on Verdun would be worth the price paid for it.

To France then, and the French armies at Verdun, all eyes were turned, for at this moment she held the fate of the Allies in her hands. Let her hold on to Verdun, let her defeat the Germans there by successful resistance, and hold off the enemy till that hour arrived, now fast approaching, when fresh British forces would have sailed for France, and have taken their place beside the *poilus*. Every little helped; and the fierce encounter

taking place beneath the shattered roof of the fortress of Douaumont was assisting not a little.

"They will come again, later on, perhaps, when it is dark," Henri told his friends, "and we must make ready to resist them. Pile up the bags and place them three deep now, for during the last attack they were nearly pulled over. After that there's little for us to do but to wait and smoke. Of fighting we shall have our full before this little business is ended."

Darkness came on after a while, and presently the gloom within the fortress was so deep that even the walls lining the stairway were invisible, nor had any of the party any means of illuminating them, or of lighting up the interior of the hall held by the Brandenburgers. All they could do was to crouch behind their wall and listen for the attack which they knew must be coming. Then, of a sudden, there was a violent explosion just outside their wall, and one farther back in the chamber which they occupied. Hand-grenades had been thrown by the enemy, and hardly had the explosions taken place than there was the sound of another charge, and a horde of men dashed up the stairs and flung themselves upon the barricade which the *poilus* were defending.

CHAPTER XVI

A Fight to a Finish

A growl came from the man seated at the breech end of the machine-gun:

"Bah! It is smashed! That grenade has burst the casing and shaken the whole apparatus. Give me a rifle, one of you."

He searched in the darkness for the weapon, and indeed there were enough and to spare now, for the bomb which had lit in the chamber, and had exploded in that confined space, had damaged not a few of the defenders. It had stunned the majority of them, in fact, so that now, as they manned the barricade, they were half-stupid, more than half-deafened, and hardly knew what had happened. Henri and Jules, leaning against the bags and peering out into the darkness, could see the flash of men's rifles as they fired from below, and caught a glimpse of dusky figures. Then they felt the wall wobble, while something struck Henri a blow on the arm, and, stretching out his hand, he gripped first a pole and then an iron hook at the end of it. But it was only one of half a dozen such implements, which German cunning had suggested. They were at work then all about him. Those hooks caught in the upper layer of bags, and at once they were dragged outwards; Others followed, and even the storm of bullets from the rifles of the defenders could not stop them. Indeed, in quite a short space of time the better part of the barricade on which

the defenders had counted had been swept away, dragged down the stairs, and flung into the passage.

"Bayonets ready!" shouted Henri grimly. "We have got to cut our way out of this place and through the Brandenburgers. Make ready!"

He could feel men swarming up beside him, and heard Jules at his left shouting encouragement to them. Then one of the poles armed with an iron hook, failing to catch a bag, became entangled in his clothing, and in a trice, before he knew where he was, Henri was dragged over the remnants of the wall, and found himself floundering down the stairway. A minute later, with a loud shout, the *poilus* charged over him, making play with their bayonets to right and to left, and driving the Germans backward. Then, in that narrow gallery at the foot of the stairway, and at the wide exit from the hall, there took place as desperate a combat as had ever been in the whole of this desperate warfare. Men used their bayonets till the weapons were beaten out of their hands, or clubbed their rifles and swung them overhead. Then, undefeated though outnumbered, they gripped their enemies about the waist and wrestled with them, while some, a few only, for the art does not come naturally to the *poilu*, dealt swinging blows with their fists, and, driving a way through the Germans, escaped into the passage. It was a mêlée in which all was confusion, in which shouts deafened the combatants, a pack of struggling, bellowing men, which seemed as if it would fill the place for ever, and which, as so often happens, suddenly burst asunder and scattered.

An hour later, when Henri recovered consciousness—for he had been stunned by his fall—he found himself lying at the foot of the stairway, his legs still resting on the last steps and his head on the narrow railway. A man lay across his body—a huge, beefy individual of extraordinary weight, who pressed him hard against the concrete. There were other men lying all about him—dead men, no doubt, for they made no movement—while the stairs themselves, what was left of the parapet of bags which he and his comrades had erected, and the entrance to the gun chamber above, were littered with soldiers, French and German. Strangely enough, though the place had been sunk in darkness during that last desperate attack, it was now illuminated, not brilliantly, it is true, but sufficiently for him to be able to make out his surroundings and to discern objects.

With a desperate effort, Henri contrived to throw off the dead weight which lay across him, and, raising his head slowly, peered in all directions, feeling dazed and shaken, and as yet hardly appreciating what had happened. Then, little by little, he realized the situation, realized that his band of noble *poilus* had broken up, that many, indeed, lay dead about him, and that the rest had scattered, perhaps had been dragged off as prisoners, and perhaps—and how he hoped it—had gained the open and had made their way back to the French lines.

"Better be careful. Better be a little cautious," he told himself, beginning to peer over the broad back of a man who lay beside him. "That's that hall in which the

Brandenburgers had taken up their quarters. Why, they've a fire burning, and are eating a meal round it. And—and—who's that? I've seen that chap before; who is he?"

In his semi-dazed condition he was horribly puzzled, and, shading his eyes with one trembling hand, peered round the corner of the entrance to that hall at the group occupying its centre. There were perhaps a hundred Brandenburgers seated in a wide straggling ring round a fire which blazed in their midst, and which lit up their surroundings and threw long shadows upon what was left of the concrete walls of the fortress. The beams from those flickering flames fell too upon another group—a group, it seemed, of officers—occupying a retired corner, and upon two solitary individuals who stood near by under the eye of a sentry squatting on a block of masonry not far from them. It gave, no doubt, some indication of the strenuous time through which Henri had passed, and of his stunned condition, that it was quite two minutes before in one of those figures he recognized Jules—the jovial Jules, sadly dishevelled now, his helmet gone, his clothing torn, and a blood-stained handkerchief round his forehead. Yet it was the old Jules—that cheery, optimistic, unconquerable individual—looking about him with a careless air and watching the Brandenburgers as they laughed and smoked and chatted as if he would have gladly joined them. That, indeed, was one of the characteristics of the gallant Jules; he could fight like a tiger if need be, though always with a smile on his lips, and, when the time for fighting had gone, no more friendly individual could have been discovered. Yes, it was Jules, a prisoner, and with him another of the *poilus* who had formed one of Henri's party.

"Wait a moment! Jules right enough!" said Henri, still inclined to be doubtful; for his limbs shook, his head wobbled badly, and his eyes were bloodshot and almost incapable of seeing. "But, who's that other fellow—the chap up in the corner, with his helmet tilted back, that swaggering beggar who's laying down the law to the officers with him? Jingo! That man! Good Heavens!"

No wonder that he gave vent to such an exclamation, for now, as his shaken brain slowly cleared, and his eyes, becoming more accustomed to the flickering light, enabled him to see better, he realized that not only was his old friend a prisoner amongst the Brandenburgers, but that one of their officers—their commanding officer it seemed—was indeed none other than that individual whom he had accosted earlier. The man seemed to be dogging Henri's footsteps. For, consider: it was he who had followed the two young Frenchmen and the bulky Stuart along that tunnel when they were escaping from Ruhleben; it was he again with that party of officers into whose midst Henri and Jules had stumbled the other evening when out on a reconnaissance; and, once more, it was he who had demanded the surrender of the garrison manning that gun-chamber.

"Bah! He again!" growled Henri. "When lots of other Brandenburgers—better Brandenburgers, I should say—have been killed by our fire, he is still living, and he's the man who wanted to shoot us out of hand down in the forest. Wonder whether he's recognized Jules already?"

He had no need to wonder for very long, for hardly had he made this last discovery when the officer in question—that arrogant, snappy little individual, who peered about him with an indefinite something which stamped him as a man of lower caste, one who had gained promotion from the ranks—rose to his feet, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, and swaggered towards the prisoners, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his head pushed forward, and a truculent, domineering, brutal air about him. Halting in front of the two prisoners, he gave them the benefit of a stare which would have been rude at any time, and which even warfare hardly excused, and then, without the smallest warning, so swiftly in fact that Henri was staggered, he suddenly drew one hand out of his pocket and dealt Jules a blow across the jaw with his open hand which sent that young fellow staggering.

"Ha, ha! That moved you," the German laughed, turning his head over his shoulder to make sure that his brother officers had watched the movement. "That's stirred you up, my friend! Yes, my friend—for don't forget we have met before, haven't we? What, you don't remember? Then let me tell you: at Ruhleben, my friend, my Frenchman—at Ruhleben, where I happen to remember very thoroughly the manner in which you treated me. Do you forget, then? Do you deny that it was you who crept through that tunnel, and, breaking a hole through the earth beyond the entanglements, reached the open; and later, when I followed—having dared the journey along the tunnel—you and that huge brute of an Englishman—that swine of an Englishman—who was with you, pulled me up as if I were a puppy and threw me back again, shaking the teeth out of my head almost? Burr!"

The little dried-up German officer's eyes flashed vengefully as he spoke of the matter, and he was all the more incensed an instant later when, rather anticipating some fun—for to the German comrades of this officer the ill-treatment of a prisoner was certainly fun—these men drew nearer, and, hearing his words, one of them—a huge, fat, unwieldy person, with flabby cheeks and pendulous chin, to say nothing of the huge girth which he presented—giggled and chortled loudly, and suddenly placed a heavy hand on the lieutenant's shoulder—a hand the weight of which caused him to stagger.

"Drew you out like a puppy, ho?" he shouted. "Drew our dear Max up out of the earth as a bird draws a worm; and then had the daring, the effrontery, to dash our immaculate, if not extremely dignified friend backward till his teeth shook. Ho! That's fun! And how one would like to see the thing repeated!"

The steely-grey eyes of Lieutenant Max turned towards this hulking German, and shot at him a glance which was angry and threatening, a glance, however, which failed altogether to impress the man who had addressed him. For this hulking officer roared with laughter, and shook to such an extent that the wreaths of fat on his body wobbled.

"But this is fine!" he shouted, "We have roused the lion in our little Max, and he is angry—angry with me, mark you, my friends—because I would like to see repeated something which no doubt was most entertaining. But, surely, Max, you were not defeated by this fellow, this puny Frenchman?"

The big German ran a pair of critical eyes over the dishevelled figure of Jules, standing helpless before him, eyes which nevertheless did not fail to note the determined look of this young man, his unflinching attitude, and the gleam of anger which came from behind his eyes, and which threatened retaliation. Yes, at that very moment the impetuous Jules, stung by the blow which Max had dealt him, and understanding every word that passed, was on the eve of throwing himself upon the German; and then, as he glanced from one to the other, and helplessly round the hall at the backs of the Brandenburgers—indifferent to what befel their prisoners—to the exit from that hall and the stairway beyond it, at the summit of which he and Henri and those other comrades had put up such a fight, his wandering eyes lit upon the figures of Germans and Frenchmen—the fallen men who had grappled at the foot of the stairs—and, passing from one to another, came upon a face, an eager face, wherein two eyes were set—eyes which were staring hard in his direction. The face moved, while the owner of it sat up a little and held up a warning finger.

"Henri!" exclaimed Jules, and at once took command of himself, and pulled his somewhat shaken frame up at attention.

"What's that?" demanded the big German abruptly. "See, Max, he is defying you, this fellow. And you say that he drew you out of the earth and threw you back, almost shaking the teeth out of your head? Unbelievable! Yet, if it is true, why, no Brandenburger will sit still under such an insult."

The jeering laughter of this giant, the covert smiles and the outspoken remarks of other German officers, sent the blood flaring again to Max's cheeks. He scowled, first at one and then at others of his comrades; and, turning once more to the prisoner, and catching at that moment a gleam of defiance from his eyes, struck out again with one hand and almost floored the unfortunate and helpless Jules.

"That to commence with," he told him, "and then to finish the matter. I don't forget, mind you, the blow that you landed on my body in that forest the other night. No, believe me, I, Max, forget nothing of that sort. Then I would have had you shot out of hand, though the occasion was not convenient; but now there is no reason why the execution should not be carried out. You are an escaped prisoner of war; you have assaulted a German officer in the execution of his duty; and here you are, captured, defying the captors of the Fort of Douaumont. March him to the far end of the hall, and call out half a dozen of those guzzling fellows to shoot him."

The armed sentry, who had stood by all this while, taking but little notice of the scene, looking tired and bored and as if he longed to join his comrades, pulled himself together, and, shouldering his rifle, gave a husky order.

"Over there!" he called. "Stand up against the wall! Sergeant Huefer, the officer requires a shooting-party."

The selfsame Sergeant Huefer, at that moment engaged in finishing a hasty meal, looked round and scowled; and then, seeing the snappy little German officer, called Max, looking at him, stood up promptly.

"A shooting-party, sir?" he asked.

"A shooting-party," came the abrupt answer. "Draw them up in front of those two prisoners."

"Two!" exclaimed the big German officer, who with the others was watching the scene.

"Yes, two," snapped Max, swinging round upon him, ready to vent his anger on any one of them.

"But wait! Not two; one only—the escaped prisoner of war, who struck you."

The big German and this snappy little fellow, Max, stared at one another, the former looking urbane and jovial and unconcerned, whilst Max was trembling with rage. He could have kicked this big German who ventured to obstruct him, and who seemed about to thwart his purpose. Yet Max was a careful individual, who had indeed worked his way upwards in the German army, and obtained slow if certain promotion, by constant observation of the regulations. The shooting of captured Frenchmen was one thing—a common enough thing no doubt—but disobedience, defiance of a senior officer, was an altogether different matter, and this big, hulking German happened to be Max's senior by a very slender margin. So slender, indeed, that the position was almost doubtful. Indeed, at that moment neither Max nor this big German could say which of the two was the senior in rank, and entitled to command this party, though it happened that the bigger of the two was not a Brandenburger, but belonging to some other corps, who had by chance fallen in with the party told off to attack the fort of Douaumont, and so found himself amidst its captors. For a moment, then, the two regarded one another, Max flaming with anger, defiant, on the point of abruptly ordering this hulking individual to mind his own business. And then that sense of discretion which had helped him in the past came to his assistance, and he forced a smile—an unwilling smile—while his eyes flashed a vengeful glance at his opponent.

"Then you object?" he asked sharply. "Well, then, let it be one—the prisoner of war. We will shoot him, and get it over quickly. Sergeant, march the firing-party forward, I will give the word to shoot."

Still shaken, his head swimming yet after that struggle on the stairway, his bloodshot eyes fixed upon the figures of Jules, of the officers, and of Sergeant Huefer and the party of men he was now parading, Henri never felt more helpless in all his life before. He felt pinned to the spot, incapable of action; and, indeed, common sense—what little of it he still possessed after the blow which had rendered him unconscious—told him that action

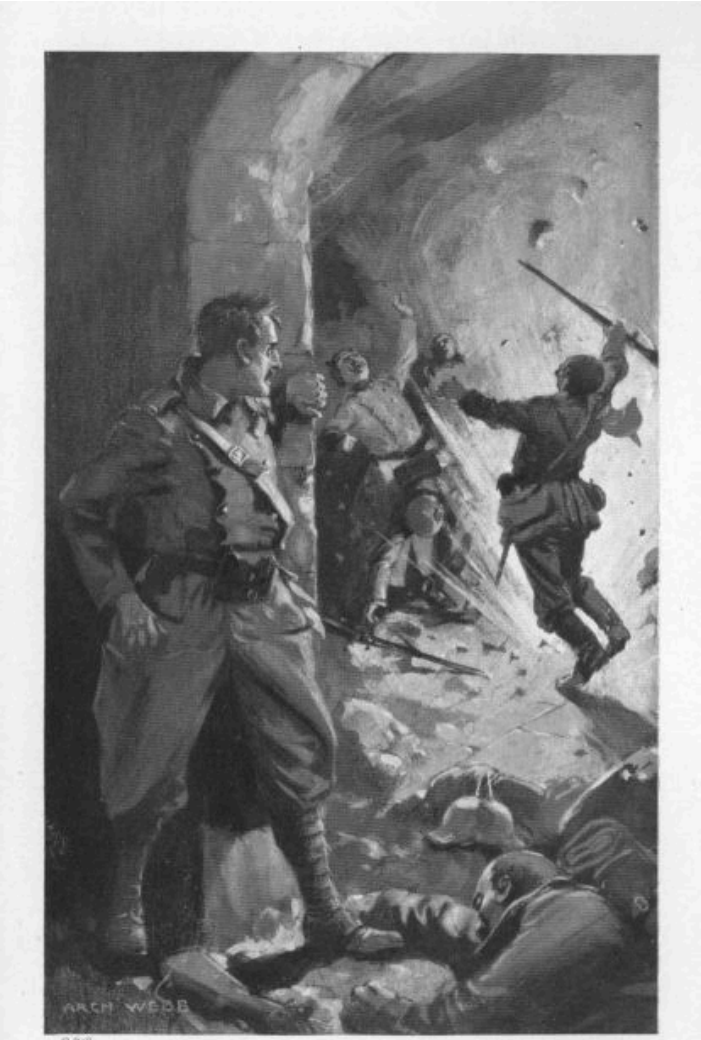
of any sort was useless. Yet, could he see a friend, an old chum, a comrade as dear to him as any brother, shot down in cold blood in front of these leering men? Could he watch him put up as a target, to be butchered by these unfeeling Germans? No. The thought that Jules's fate hung heavily in the balance, that some desperate action on his part might bring him assistance, spurred Henri to movement, and, rising to his knees, he groped his way towards the entrance to the hall wherein the firing-party were then assembling. As he crawled across the bodies then littering the gallery along which the tiny railway ran, and crossed the foot of the stairway, his hand lit upon a rifle, which he seized instantly and raised to his shoulder. Then he dropped it again, for the movement was too much for him, and, stumbling forward, fell on his face, his head swimming once more, his brain in a whirl, and his pulses beating in his ears till he was deafened. It was just at the moment when Sergeant Huefer, undisturbed by the task allotted to him, in fact, eager to finish off the prisoner and get back to his meal, gave a short, sharp order and set his firing-squad in motion, that Henri's outstretched fingers came into contact with another object—a round, cylindrical object attached to a short stick, a hand-grenade, one of those bombs which had helped to blow in the barricade which he and his gallant *poilus* had erected at the top of the stairway.

With an effort he pulled himself together, and, gripping the stick, felt for the safety-pin, removal of which would allow explosion of the grenade once it came into contact with any body. Then, rising to his knees, and unsteadily to his feet, he stretched out his left hand to the wall, while with his right he swung the hand-grenade backwards and forwards. By then the firing-party had been halted in front of Jules, who, head in air and arms folded, stood against the far wall.

"Load!" he heard the command ring out and echo down the gallery. "Present!"

Up went the rifles to the shoulders.

Henri gave a sharp jerk to the handle of the grenade as he loosened his hold of it, and sent it flying forward into the hall, where it landed a moment later—landed, indeed, within a foot of the fire which the men had built in the centre of this big place, and about which they had been seated. There followed a blinding flash, a thundering detonation, and then shouts and shrieks and groans, and clouds of dust and falling debris. An instant later, Henri had fallen backward into the gallery, and lay, much as he had lain before, among the bodies of those who had taken part in the fight on the stairway.



C 838

"THE GRENADE LANDED WITHIN A FOOT OF THE FIRE ABOUT WHICH THE MEN HAD BEEN SEATED"

"THE GRENADE LANDED WITHIN A FOOT OF THE FIRE ABOUT WHICH THE MEN HAD BEEN SEATED"

CHAPTER XVII

Charge of the Gallant Bretons

Let us for the moment leave Henri and Jules in the centre of the ruins of Fort Douaumont, and return for a few brief seconds to that gallant yet dangerously small force

of Frenchmen, who, until this moment, had been fighting to check the advance of the Germans about the town of Verdun.

Five days of the most terrific fighting had passed. Five days of incessant bombardment from massed German guns, which had literally blown the defenders out of their trenches. And during those few days, when the French lines to the north of the salient and to the east of the River Meuse were driven in till they rested near Vacherauville, on the Meuse, and ran from thence to Thiaumont and Douaumont Fort and Vaux, and so back to the Meuse again, French efforts had not been confined alone to local fighting.

On the very first day, indeed, what had been strongly suspected before became abundantly apparent, and it was clear that a German attack of unprecedented force and violence on the salient of Verdun was to be expected. The weight of artillery alone which for all those hours had been pouring a torrent of shells on the heights of the Meuse was sufficient to indicate the nature of the German preparations. A thousand guns, directing their missiles on one sector of the long line of trenches wriggling across the north-eastern provinces of France, was no unusual feature of this extraordinary and gigantic warfare, but here there were not one thousand guns alone but many more, many hundreds more, probably even in excess of two thousand; while, moreover, the troops of the Kaiser, debouching from the woods, marching up those ravines giving access to the plateau of Douaumont, and massing behind evergreen firs farther away, as discerned by the air-pilots of our ally, disclosed the fact that those massed guns were to be supported by an equally enormous concentration of troops—a concentration which could have been effected only for one purpose. In short, and in fact, it was clear that this was to be no ordinary attack on the salient of Verdun, but a gigantic offensive—one which would demand a numerous defending force and guns in proportion.

But the movement of troops from one area of the field to another is a comparatively slow process at the best of times, for it must be remembered that, behind the fighting-lines of such an army as opposed the Germans, rails are always more or less congested, while an enormous mass of vehicles ply the roads, bringing up ammunition and food, and hundreds of other articles necessary for the fighters. Time, then, was required in which to gather French forces, and time in which to rush them over the rails, and by motor-transport along the roads, to the neighbourhood of Verdun, and then to push them up to the fighting-line.

Those gallant fellows who had faced the first rush of the Germans, who had stood under a tornado of shells, and who had held on to their positions so desperately, were fighting all the while, not so much to hold the particular positions in which they were, as to gain time, to resist as long as possible, to thwart the enemy in his intentions, to delay his advance, and to keep him away from the main line of defence till such time as reinforcements could reach them. Very gallantly had the thin line of heroes carried out their purpose, holding on, often enough, till they were killed to the last man. They had made the Kaiser's troops pay dearly for every inch of ground; and, whereas the German

High Command had confidently expected to reach Verdun within a day or two, five days had passed, and yet, in spite of overwhelming gun-fire and masses of troops, the French had only just retired to their main defensive position.

Douaumont stood on that line. Douaumont, which the Kaiser had told his people was the corner-stone of the salient which he hoped to capture; and Douaumont, as we know, had fallen already to the Brandenburgers. Yet behind Douaumont, behind the Côte du Poivre and the Côte de Talou, there existed yet miles of upland plateau before the city of Verdun could be reached—miles which the Germans must cross before they could hope to complete its capture.

We have seen how, attempting to follow up their drive to the north, the French guns on Mort Homme and Hill 304 had outflanked the Germans, and had driven them from the Côte de Talou and the Côte du Poivre. We have followed their movements later, when, abandoning the drive in a southerly direction over the slopes of the Côte du Poivre, the German war lords caused their armies to swerve to the east to face the fort of Douaumont and to march towards it. Let us anticipate their movements by a little, and say that, having captured the fort—a mere empty and cracked vessel—they found themselves still faced by the French, who had retired only a short distance beyond it; and who, reinforced that very night by the 20th Corps—as dashing a corps as ever existed—counter-attacked with furious energy, and advanced their lines till they surrounded the captured fort on three sides, and held, indeed, a portion of the interior. There, in that position, they dug themselves in firmly, and though the Germans continued to attack that portion of the line with a fury never before exceeded, and with utter disregard of the losses they suffered, not for weeks did they so much as dent it. Like the Côte de Talou, and the approaches from the north, Douaumont and the neighbouring trenches defied them; and, tiring, as it were, of the venture in that direction, yet determined as ever to capture Verdun and the salient, they once more changed their line of attack. Crossing the Meuse, they flung their details against the Mort Homme and Hill 304, hoping to capture those positions and sweep away the guns which enfiladed the Côte du Poivre. The removal of these would allow them to continue that advance from the north which threatened to shorten the base of the salient and to capture its defenders.

If we were to venture to describe every attack made by the Germans, every gallant defence of the French *poilus*, and the course in detail of the terrific conflict which raged—and, indeed, still rages as we write—round the salient of Verdun, we should require a multiplicity of chapters. For, indeed, foiled at the outset by the failure of their giant attack to do more than drive the French on to their main positions, in spite of the huge advantage of a surprise effected on the 21st February, and forced, as it were, by public opinion—the opinion of Germans at home, of their Austrian allies, and of every neutral country in the world—the Kaiser's war lords kept desperately at the task of subduing the salient. Not one, but dozens of assaults were made either upon the Mort Homme and Hill 304 positions, or upon the plateau of Douaumont, extending at times to the farm of Thiaumont, and later, after weeks and weeks of conflict, to the fort of Vaux and the

trenches south of it. The most gigantic attack on any one position that has ever been recorded in the history of the world was accompanied by other facts hitherto never seen in warfare.

The hosts of German troops concentrated on the face of the salient approached at times three-quarters of a million, and needed constant replenishment; for French 75's, machine-gun and rifle-fire bit deep into the ranks, and soldiers—hundreds of them, nay, thousands—fell, till the slopes leading to Mort Homme and to the gentle wooded heights of the Meuse became a mere shambles. Four months of fighting, indeed, found General Joffre and his brave troops still holding the line, still selling inches of the hills when the pressure became too great or the enemy gun-fire too fierce to be withstood—selling those inches at a price which can only be termed grisly and exorbitant—and now and again counter-attacking, when pressure from the enemy had forced them to yield ground of vital value.

Yes, after four months of terrific fighting, Verdun, that sleepy old town down by the River Meuse, and the lines of trenches surrounding it which formed that historic salient of which we have written, were still in the hands of the French, still denied the Germans; while the losses inflicted upon the latter, the increasing pressure of the British, now in crowded ranks along the Western Front—so crowded, indeed, that already a fourth army had taken over lines from the French, thus yielding reserves for further fighting at Verdun —that increasing pressure and a sudden brilliantly successful offensive on the part of the Russians in Galicia were putting the Kaiser and his war lords in a sad predicament. They, too, needed reserves: reserves to feed those horrible gaps at Verdun; reserves to march against the British Front; reserves to rail to Russia, there, if it were possible, to stem the tide of Muscovite troops pouring through the broken Austrian lines on their way to Vienna and Berlin.

Let us leave the combatants there to return to Jules and Henri. Pandemonium reigned in that huge battered hall of the fort of Douaumont when the bomb which Henry had thrown had done its work in the midst of the Germans. The fire hitherto burning so cheerfully in the centre of the darkened hall was scattered in every quarter, leaving glowing embers in odd corners and crannies. Had there been more light upon the surroundings, many of the men, seated but a moment or so before, would have been seen stretched on the ground, killed by the explosion. That big officer, who, still chuckling, had looked on at the preparations for Jules's execution, might have been seen leaning against the outer wall of the fort, his tunic torn and burned, a red pool collecting on the flags beside him, his jaw dropped, his eyes wide open, insensible and dying. And of Max, that little snappy officer, not a sign would have been found. For, like every surviving man who had stood in the hall, he had bolted. A hand gripped Jules suddenly, as he lay gasping against the wall.

"Who's that?" he demanded breathlessly. "Hands off, or I'll choke you," and, shaken though he was by the explosion, he prepared to throw himself upon the individual who

had accosted him.

"Jules, is that you, Jules?" came a feeble voice, and almost at the same moment a heavy form flopped down beside him and straightway rolled across him.

It was Henri, as unconscious at that instant as was the big German, chuckling but a minute earlier.

"Henri!" Jules shouted; "Henri, what's happened? Are you killed like the rest of them?"

Evidently the gallant Henri was nothing of the sort, for, opening his eyes and staring out into the darkness, he growled a denial.

"Dead? Not much! but soon shall be if we stay here long enough for those fellows to bring lights," he grumbled. "If they bring lights they'll get us, and then——"

"You needn't mention the rest of the details. Pull yourself together!" Jules told him. "Here, wait a moment!"

Freeing himself from the dead weight of his chum, he dashed across the hall, feeling giddy and shaken by the explosion, and, scrambling on hands and knees amongst the bodies lying around the spot where the fire had been burning, he soon secured a water-bottle, and, hastening back, first dashed some of the contents into Henri's face, and then lifted the metal cup to his lips and let him drain it.

"Wanted that—eh?" he asked, having himself gulped down a draught. "Let's have another. Now, here we are! My word, what a bust-up! How did it happen? I saw you over there, just outside the hall, and wondered whether you'd do anything. You did—eh? Was that your bomb? Tell me about it."

Henri scoffed at him—scoffed angrily.

"Let's take a seat in the very centre, search for food, and sit down to a leisurely dinner," he said, his voice choked with satire. "Better still, let's ring a bell, if there's one, and ask that Max individual to come in and join us; he'd enjoy it, wouldn't he?"

"The demon! He'd have shot me in another minute. But still, here we are!"

"And the sooner we get out of it the better. That water's made me feel far better, and I can stand now, I believe. Yes, giddy a bit, but I can still stick to my pins, and that's something. What do we do—eh? Here, pull off the uniforms of a couple of these fellows, they'll not miss them, and let's change clothes as quickly as we can. Don't forget, too, that once we've changed we are Germans—Brandenburgers, 6th Brigade fellows, who've attacked the fort and helped to capture it. No more French after we've got into our disguises."

The suggestion came glibly enough, and sounded extremely simple; yet when the two —shaken after that terrific fight on the stairway, and once again by the explosion which Henri had manoeuvred—came to attempt the task they found it almost beyond them, for your German, as a general rule, is of no mean stature. Even in days when rations may be reduced owing to the British blockade, which holds up supplies destined for the German Empire, German recruits are still plump and fat, and Brandenburgers not less so than their fellows. Thus the task of turning dead men over and filching their garments, hard enough in any case, was made more difficult in the darkness, particularly so for young fellows such as Jules and Henri, who were not stoutly built like the Germans.

"Slip on any sort of an old coat and helmet at first," Henri advised, "then if that Max comes back we can push our way in amongst the bodies of the fallen, and he'll be none the wiser. Later, when we have the opportunity, we can make a more leisurely search, and perhaps we shall be lucky in finding garments that fit us."

It was a fortunate thing, indeed, that they decided on such a plan. For as they went about the hall, stooping over the bodies of the fallen, endeavouring to select and discover clothes likely to suit their own stature, a loud order was heard from behind the battered end of the hall, and presently some twenty men inarched in, the short and snappy officer leading them.

"Pull out the fellows who are still alive, or not too seriously injured," he commanded. "Leave the dead till later on. Now hurry!"

Parties of stretcher-bearers followed the soldiers, and, starting at once, began to bend over the fallen forms lying about the hall, turning men over, dragging the dead aside, and lifting those who were wounded out of the mass. Coming to a distant corner, not so far indeed from the exit leading to the stairway which Jules and Henri had defended, a party of bearers discovered a pack of Germans lying in all directions, their limbs stretched in the most fantastic postures, some on their sides, their heads resting on an arm as if they were sleeping; others on their faces, their arms doubled up beneath them; and others, again, on their backs, stiff and stark already.

"Dead!" said the commander of the party, a junior non-commissioned officer. "On one side with him!"

"Dead!" repeated one of the bearers, leaning over another figure. "Here, he's not a big man, I can manage him single-handed."

"As dead as any," cried a third, and seemed quite jovial about it. "Here we are! He's no weight at all—quite a puny fellow for a Brandenburger."

They dragged perhaps half a dozen bodies away from the corner to the far wall, and laid them in a row beside others already collected; then, gathering up the wounded and carrying them outside, they returned again, completing their task after some few minutes.

"Light up!" Max, that short and snappy German officer, commanded. "Get a fire going, and let us resume the meal. One moment though! Have any of you seen a sign of those Frenchmen—the two whom we were about to shoot?"

"One there, sir," came the answer, while a bearer holding a torch lit up that part of the hall by the wall against which Jules and his fellow-prisoner had been stationed. "He's dead —a piece of masonry, dislodged by the explosion, fell on him."

Max seized the torch from the man, and, striding forward, bent over the figure of the *poilu*, and, turning the body with his foot—for this German was an individual possessed of little feeling, indeed a heartless wretch, a callous fellow—he placed the torch nearer, and stared at the face of the Frenchman.

"Burr! Not my man! And no one has seen the other?"

"No one!"

"Then we will wait till morning and search the place. Now, let the men turn to at their meal. Sergeant, wake me in an hour's time, when I will go round and inspect the sentries."

Gradually the fire in the centre of the hall died down, while men nodded as they sat on blocks of fallen masonry, or on forms which had been dragged into the hall. Darkness slowly penetrated to every corner of the place and almost hid the Germans. Then a figure stirred, one of the dead sat up slowly and nudged another of the dead beside him. One of the nodding figures seated upon a form on the far side of the fire yawned, stretching his arms widely, kicked the ashes from the dying embers with a heavy boot, and looked about him. Then his hair rose on his head, while his eyes protruded in the most horrible manner. Perspiration dropped from his forehead, his hands shook, and his limbs trembled, as he gaped at those two dead figures sitting up and regarding him closely.

"Dead men sit up and look at me! Dead men!" he spluttered, and slowly rose to his feet.

There was a frozen look on the wretch's face now, and he kept his eyes on those two figures as if he had no power to turn them away, as if, like a serpent, they fascinated him. Then of a sudden he gave vent to a loud scream and dashed from the hall, upsetting his comrades as he did so.

"Down! Dead men again! Lower! What a business!" groaned Jules as he flopped himself on to the flags once more, his face turned towards Henri.

"S—s—sh! Shut up! They are all on their feet again. Confound that fellow! It was bad luck his suddenly looking up and finding us sitting here staring at him. We've got to move," whispered Henri.

"Soon too," Jules told him, "precious soon. My, isn't that Max in a rage, and aren't the lot of them bothered!"

Yet not so bothered that the noise which followed that piercing scream did not subside quickly. After all, screams were not unusual in those days of strenuous combat, when Germans were driven to the assault, time and again, and death and destruction were so near them—that terrible shell-fire which smote them from the missiles of the French 75's, the raking hail of bullets from machine-guns, the detonation of exploding missiles, the roar, the crash, the smoke, the ever-present danger. All had told on the nerves, not of one man here and there, but on hundreds of the Kaiser's soldiers. Men went mad in those days of attack on Douaumont, just as they went mad in the onslaught at Ypres in October, 1914; just, indeed, as they had lost their reason during other terrible periods. Yes, your German war lord is no sympathetic commander. Losses, frightful losses, do not frighten or trouble him so long as he is reasonably sure of obtaining his objective.

And German losses had been frightful enough in all conscience since the war started. Those losses were telling upon the German ranks now—had been telling for a considerable period—and were likely in the months coming, towards the end of 1916, to tell so severely, that it might be beyond the power of the Central Empires to hold their lines any longer. Yes, men went mad often enough, and no doubt the man in question was another such unfortunate individual.

"Confound him!" growled Max. "Why didn't he get shot as we came to the fort, or in the attack on that stairway? What's he want to disturb our rest for when we want every minute of rest we can get? for soon those Frenchmen will be returning. Turn in again, you men. We'll search for that rascal in the morning."

But would they? For listen: as the night grew older, as darkness became denser above the shattered fort of Douaumont, and the fire died down so that the Brandenburgers holding that central hall were no longer visible, figures began to collect behind the French trenches—the active, eager figures of gallant Bretons of the 20th Corps, a crack corps, to whom the task had been assigned of recapturing the fortress. A gun opened far behind, a rocket soared, and then a wave of figures poured over the parapet of the trenches and ten thousand shouting, furious Frenchmen streamed down upon the debris of Douaumont—that "corner-stone" of the defences of the salient, of the capture of which the Kaiser had boasted so loudly.

"What's that? French shouts! French bugles! A counter-attack! Get up," Henri whispered in Jules's ear. "We've got to take our chance to join them'."

CHAPTER XVIII

A Sinister German

What a sight that 20th French Corps—those noble Bretons—would have presented had it been daylight when they leapt from their trenches and advanced in one stupendous rush upon the captured fort of Douaumont! Filled with élan, determined to throw the invader backward, stung by the loss of trenches which had been French but a little while before, and eager beyond all words to bring assistance to that gallant yet sadly-thinned line which had staved off the Kaiser's hordes, this 20th Corps—the first of the reserves which General Petain had been able to rush to the scene of action—hurled itself impetuously at the Germans. Star-shells burst into flame overhead, showing dashing *poilus*, flickered from the tips of bayonets and lit up the smoke from exploding shells, where a canopy of it hung about the devoted heads of that gallant corps. In the darkness, in the fitful light cast by those shells, now and again augmented by the flashing beams of an electric search-light, a desperate hand-to-hand conflict took place.

The line of Bretons was halted for a few moments as it met the Germans, it wavered, perhaps, here and there just a trifle, and then it swept on as a flood sweeps down a road, washing the debris of the 6th Brigade of the Brandenburg Corps before it, submerging hundreds, and trampling not a few into the mud and into the pit-holes and craters dug everywhere by German shells.

"They come! A counter-attack! Prepare to receive the enemy!"

It was Max, that snappy little German officer, who gave the command and called his men about him.

"Man every loophole! And hold on at whatever cost! You—you are fit to fight," he suddenly snapped, turning upon one of the wounded wretches who had suffered from that explosion caused by the bomb tossed by Henri. "You are skulking, my friend. Up! Seize a rifle! Get to your loophole!"

The man staggered. His eyes were bloodshot, his clothing torn and tattered after the explosion, with one arm swinging loose in its sleeve. He looked at this peremptory officer in dazed fashion. Indeed, like Henri and Jules, he had been more than half stunned, and his wits were still wool-gathering.

"Seize a rifle! Go to a loophole, eh?" he ejaculated.

"Fool! Yes! Fight—fight for your life; fight for your Fatherland!" Max shouted at him. "Here—here's a rifle," he went on, tearing one from beneath the body of a fallen soldier, and handing it to him. "Now off with you, at once!"

"At once? Fight at once?" the man stammered, while those who watched, even in that fitful light—for the fire built by the officer in the far corner was still burning—noticed that a dribble of blood was oozing from the corner of his lips, "but, sir——" he began.

"No 'buts'!" bellowed Max at him; "to your duty!"

The man gripped weakly at the rifle, turned obediently to carry out the order, and then, staggering a pace or two, fell full length on the floor.

"Bah! A bad choice then! Well, one makes mistakes," Max said, a grim smile on his face. "But you," he called, selecting another individual seated on the ground, his back resting against the wall—a man whose pallid face told that he was suffering—"you get up and go about your duty."

As if determined that there should be no error and no backsliding, no hesitation in this case, he applied his boot to the unfortunate individual, and drove him from his position. "Now, you, and you, and you! About your business! Get to your duty!"

Henri and Jules came in for his attentions, for they had crept away from that hideous row of dead, and both gaped at him for a while in open-mouthed amazement, wondering, indeed, whether they were discovered, wondering in a half-bewildered sort of way what they ought to do. For still Henri's ears buzzed, and still his brain reeled; not so much from the explosion—for the wall separating the hall from the corridor outside had sheltered him not a little, but reeling from the effects of his tumble downstairs and the mad mêlée which had taken place there. As for Jules, the fellow was quite light-headed, for the bomb had sent him backward against the wall with a crash, and he too had taken his share in that desperate fight at the top of the stairway. He began to giggle, which was a way Jules had, and Max, happening to catch sight of him at the moment, and stung to fury by such mirth on the part of one of his men, by such a sign of insubordination, smote him across the face, little realizing that the one he struck was the same man, that very prisoner, whom he had struck not so long before, and whom he would willingly have executed.

"Come along!" Henri managed to whisper to his chum. "Better to be taken for Germans than to be discovered in our disguises. Let's get hold of rifles and take our post at some loophole. Those were French shouts we heard, and it may be that we shall have an opportunity of joining our people."

"And in any case one needn't fire into our fellows," responded Jules, his face still smarting from the blow that Max had dealt him. "But listen, Henri; if I get a chance I'll kill that fellow. Better still, if I get a chance I'll capture the brute, and carry him back to our lines, where he can be tried for offering violence to prisoners. Crikey! How wobbly a fellow feels! My feet are too big and too clumsy for anything."

It was a sorry band which obeyed the peremptory order of the bullying German. Men staggered across the littered floor of that hall, steering their way between fallen blocks of masonry and wounded men damaged by the explosion of Henri's making. Passing through the exit, they clambered over the bodies of the fallen Germans who lay thickly at the foot of the stairway, and across the bodies, too, of many a gallant Frenchman. Then, directed by the bullying Max, they climbed the stairway or went along the gallery, and presently

were manning the embrasures through which the guns of the fortress of Douaumont—when it was indeed a fortress—commanded the surrounding country. Flashes could be seen through those embrasures—flashes close at hand, and others farther distant—while the air was torn and rent by the crash of distant guns, by the detonation of exploding shells, and by the sharp snap and rattle of musketry. There were yells, too—shouts of terror from the Brandenburgers, now being driven back towards the fortress, and the bellows of excited and triumphant men wresting ground from them.

"Keep an eye round you," Henri told Jules, for the two were posted at one embrasure, and no one else was in the chamber. "What's to prevent a fellow lowering himself from this point and joining our fellows? A rope is what is wanted, but it's a plaguey thing to find in such a place and at such a moment. Hold on here, Jules, while I go skirmishing."

Staggering away from his comrade, Henri reached the head of the stairway and clambered down it, leaning against the side wall with both hands, for his feet were terribly uncertain. Then, reaching the gallery below, he turned along it, and in a little while, was within easy reach of the hall in which he and Jules had been lying, when suddenly the noise outside increased. There was a rush of steps somewhere near at hand, a crashing explosion as a bomb was thrown through an embrasure somewhere beyond him, and then a torrent of figures poured into the place—a torrent of gesticulating, shouting Frenchmen, of gallant Bretons, who had won their way to the western edge of the fortress. Lamps appeared, and flaring torches too were brought in by the soldiers, who at once proceeded to search that part of Douaumont.

In a dream, as it were, shaken by what he had gone through, and overcome somewhat by the sight and sound of friends, Henri had tumbled to the floor again, as he heard an officer give vent to a sharp order.

"Drive the fellows on before you as far as you can," he shouted, "then build up barricades across every corridor and gallery, and hold them off till we can get more men in here and drive them out of the fortress altogether. Bomb them, mes enfants! Blow them out of the place! Douaumont belongs to France, and not to the Kaiser."

Yes, in a dream, Henri heard the words, and tried to raise his shaken figure, tried his utmost to join them; and in a dream, too, he watched the Bretons as they moved rapidly about and obeyed those orders. It was perhaps a quarter of an hour later, perhaps only a few minutes, but more likely half an hour after their first appearance, that, still in the same hazy sort of way, still somewhat in dreamland, his head whirling and his ears singing, Henri became aware of a strange fact, a fact, however, which hardly struck him as peculiar at that moment, that a man not far from him—one of those corpses stretched in the gallery and illuminated by a torch thrust into a crevice of the masonry not far away—was moving, was lifting his head craftily, was creeping along over other bodies, and was peering round corners and watching the Bretons.

"Strange!" thought Henri. "What on earth can the fellow be doing? And—Christopher! He's not a Frenchman!"

That indeed was a peculiar thing; and, still in the same dazed sort of way, Henri watched and wondered.

"Not a Frenchman," he was telling himself, "then a German, and I don't know—yes, I do believe I know—the figure. Small, eh? Dressed in field-grey, yet not the usual sort of uniform. Who is he? What is the fellow? Well, I never!"

In ordinary times Henri would have made up his mind in an instant, would have acted promptly, and would have taken in the situation without a moment's hesitation. But now, what with that horrible feeling of nausea which assailed him, what with his miserable brain, which reeled and buzzed and whirled, making vision almost impossible and hearing almost out of the question, he could not, try as he would, collect his scattered wits. Indeed, he had no energy left with which to make any sort of an effort; he just gaped, smiled, and certainly grimaced at that crawling figure. He knew he was an enemy, knew that the man he watched boded no good to his comrades, and knew also that the fellow represented some subtle form of danger. Yet he could not move, could do no more than gape and grin and grimace, and could not properly realize the meaning of the situation. Then suddenly he started, for another crawling figure came from behind him, and a hand gripped his hand sharply.

"You, Henri! You here! And did not return! Why, you're sick! You're half stunned still!"

It was Jules, who, finding that his chum did not return, had descended to the gallery to find him, and, coming upon him stretched there amongst the dead, noticed, with the help of a flickering torch, that Henri's head hung, that perspiration dropped from his forehead, and that his face was deadly white and pallid. Yet his coming seemed suddenly to rouse Henri; for the latter's drooping eyelids opened widely at once, a frown crossed his forehead, and in a moment he had seized Jules's hand, and, tugging it, indicated that he was to lie down beside him.

"S—s—h!"

"What's up?" demanded Jules hoarsely.

"Down!" whispered Henri; for at that moment the figure he had been watching, and which had stretched itself flat like one of the dead, doubtless because a Frenchman was approaching, had now begun to rise stealthily. "Look!" he whispered, pointing, and then watched Jules's face as the latter fixed his eyes upon that figure.

Henri noticed at once—and it was remarkable how his wits were assembling now that Jules had stimulated them—that Jules's eyes started, that an intent look came into them

promptly, while something approaching a scowl gathered on his features.

"That man!" he heard him exclaim, and then watched as his friend flopped down amongst the dead and lay as close as possible. Then together the two watched as that German crept on still farther. A minute later and he had turned where the gallery swept round the corner of the fort abruptly and proceeded in another direction. Following promptly, creeping across the bodies of the fallen, or finding their way between them when they could—for it was not exactly nice to kneel upon the forms of men who, to whatever side they had belonged, had died fighting—Henri and Jules too turned that corner, only to find themselves now in almost complete darkness, with no light to guide them, with not a sound to tell them of the whereabouts of that sinister German, and nothing to indicate his presence.

"Stop! Let's wait and listen."

Henri's hand went out and gripped Jules's sleeve, while the two came to a halt at once, sitting up on their haunches, as it were, and peered into the darkness and listened—peered till Henri's bloodshot eyes positively ached, until tears of weakness dribbled down his face and splashed on to the pavement. As for his head, it throbbed as if a giant hammer were within it, and some demon were rattling the interior of his skull and were dancing a tattoo upon his ear-drums.

"Bah!" He felt that old nausea, and felt horribly giddy, and was forced to stretch his hands forward and lean upon them to support his weight, while everything went round and round, and, strangely enough, instead of darkness surrounding him, a thousand flashes appeared before his eyes. Jules coughed. With all his light-heartedness he was an observant and wonderfully sympathetic fellow, particularly where Henri was concerned, and now had double reason for showing him attention. Putting his arm round Henri's waist, he supported him for a while.

"Pull yourself together, Henri," he said, "for we've got to go on in a little while and trap that beggar. What's he up to? Some dirty game, you may be sure. For he's a German, don't forget, and don't forget, either, what Stuart would have said——"

"Stuart!" gurgled Henri, trying to laugh. "That good fellow! Stuart?"

"A splendid beggar!" agreed Jules. "He'd have said, bluntly enough, that every German was a dirty beggar, wouldn't he?"

Henri chortled. Somehow or other Jules had a wonderful way of stirring up his old friend, of "bucking him up", to use a slang expression; and now, just the mention of the gallant Stuart, that very breezy, hefty Englishman, fixed Henri's wandering thoughts for a moment on a far more pleasant subject, and seemed to help to steady his reeling brain, and first set him giggling and then laughing merrily.

"You'll think I'm an old woman," he told Jules at last, shaking himself like a dog.

"Indeed! Like an old woman? Well, now, old women don't usually fight terrific combats at the top of a stone stairway, and finally tumble headlong down that same stairway locked in the arms of a German. Polite old women don't do their utmost to strangle the subjects of the Kaiser; now do they, Henri? And, besides—of course this is only a very small matter—such old women as you have mentioned don't, when they've got a chance to escape the notice of such sinister gentlemen as we have been associating with lately—I mean that Max beggar and his Brandenburg fellows, who would shoot a helpless prisoner—such old bodies don't as a rule, mind you, get hold of a bomb and sling it amongst them.

"It was fine—fine!" Jules told his chum, stretching out a hand and gripping Henri's energetically.

"Oh, rot!" Henri contrived to stutter. He was getting quite indignant now. "What utter nonsense you are talking! As if any old woman would fight a German!"

"Just so! That's why I retorted when you asked me if, or rather suggested that, I thought that you were one."

"Look here!" began Henri, quite nettled, and becoming increasingly impatient, whereat Jules grinned. Indeed, it was his turn to be amused, for intuitively in the darkness he had guessed at Henri's condition; and knowing already how shaken he was, how nearly on the verge of unconsciousness, he had racked his brain for some method which might revive him. Stimulants, water, food, things of that sort, were out of the question; words alone could be employed, and somehow the clever Jules had contrived to pick the proper subject. The mention of Stuart, then, had helped to revive his friend; and now mention of Henri's gallantry had made the owner of that name quite indignant.

"Utter rot!" shouted Henri again; "as if slinging a bomb was dangerous; and as if——"

"There's one thing you can't deny," said Jules; "it saved my life, as it was designed to do, and I've not forgotten. But how d'you feel? Better, eh? Don't forget that we've lost sight of that German."

As if Henri had ever forgotten it since he had seen the lithe, cunning figure of the Brandenburger creeping in front of him. True, in that curious state in which he had been—a state bordering on unconsciousness—he had hardly been able to appreciate at times the significance of the German's presence; but now he had wakened fully to its importance.

"Jingo," he told Jules as they squatted there in the darkness, "we must find the beggar! He's armed, without a doubt; and, worse than all, he's behind our fellows, for they've gone forward into the fort. What's to prevent him shooting 'em in the back? What's to prevent

him carrying on any sort of vileness? We've got to follow at once, and, by hook or by crook, we've got to capture or kill the beggar."

"Whichever you like—either will suit me," Jules responded; "and in any case, if he's caught, it'll come to the same thing. Once we've marched him back behind our lines, and handed him over as a prisoner, he'll be shot, my boy. We can prove that he would have deliberately shot a prisoner; so it seems to me that, if we meet the gentleman, the best thing will be to end the matter promptly. But we've got to find him first, and perhaps he'll have something to say when it comes to a question of shooting."

Max, that sinister Brandenburger officer, was indeed likely enough to have a considerable amount to say in the question of his own disposal. Knowing the class of man he was—his fearlessness, for that seemed to be his one virtue; his frightfulness, for bullying and terrible deeds seemed to be the characteristic of every subject of the Kaiser—it was likely enough that this fellow would do anything to outwit the Frenchmen, and, if he could, would shatter the fort and bring it down upon his own head rather than see the French victorious.

"Stop! Wait a moment! I heard something move! Come on!" said Jules suddenly.

And together, creeping on hands and knees, the two went forward along that gallery in search of the German.

CHAPTER XIX

Heroic "Poilus"

Who can describe the condition of affairs in the shattered fort of Douaumont on that night when the gallant Bretons of the 20th Corps hurled themselves against the captors of the position? The whole of the fighting round the salient of Verdun since that eventful 21st February—now seemingly so long ago, for so much had happened, yet in reality less than a week—had been marked by the incessant thunder of guns, the continuous detonations of exploding shells, the intermittent rattle of machine-guns, and by the crescendoes of rifle-fire mingled with the shouts and shrieks of men, the cheers of triumphant attackers, and the grim, hoarse commands of officers leading their sections.

There had been many a silent, yet grimly ferocious struggle with the bayonet; when men stood outside their trenches or struggled with the enemy in what remained of their battered positions. Such scenes we know had taken place inside the fort of Douaumont, for had not Jules and Henri participated in such an adventure on the stairway? And now they were being repeated—those scenes—in many an odd part of that fortress.

Bursting in by a gateway to the west, the Bretons forced their way forward; while the Brandenburgers, beating a hasty retreat, threw up barricades and fought for them. Thus, as Henri and his chum crept along that gallery, comparatively silent for the moment, for the fight had drifted forward, and the Brandenburgers were holding a position farther to the east of the fortress, they came within sound of the combatants, and heard the shouts of men and the crack of rifles. Yet never a sight did they catch of Max, the German, though here and there torches threw a fitful gleam about the masonry.

"Then on!" said Henri, now rising to his feet and staggering forward. "Where's the beggar gone to? And what's he up to?"

"Can't say. Perhaps he's merely trying to escape; or more likely he's trying to join his own people, for you can tell quite easily that they are still holding a portion of the fort."

Yet to follow in the tracks of the German was an impossibility; for, let us explain, the interior of a fortress such as Douaumont is not so planned as to make progress easy and direct at the best of times. Such a place is designedly erected in sections, so that, should one portion suffer capture, the others may be held intact; while often enough such works are constructed so that one portion of the fortress commands by its fire the works immediately surrounding and attached to it. That gallery, then, did not run in a straight line for long: it curved abruptly to the left just as it had done before at the point where the German contrived to evade our heroes. It dropped down a flight of steps, and opened into a wide hallway much like that other in which Jules and Henri had already seen some adventure; and from this hall galleries led off, some reached by means of stairways, and others once barred by doors, now for the most part lying blackened and shattered on the flags which floored the galleries.

"Which way? Which one? How can a chap choose?" cried Henri peevishly, running the fingers of one hand through his matted hair, and looking from one to the other of the openings.

"A conundrum," smiled Jules, though he looked grim enough as Henri stared at him. "And those German shells have not made the question any the easier, have they? Who knows? The beggar may have disappeared down this hole, and one almost hopes so."

Gripping a torch suspended in a crevice between two fallen blocks of stone, he stepped towards a huge, jagged hole near the end of the hall, and held the flaming torch over it. Beneath there was a pit, with crumbling earth sides, and at the bottom a mass of shattered stonework and debris. Then, holding the torch overhead, he pointed upwards, and, glancing there, Henri saw a corresponding hole with jagged edges, through which the ponderous shells had entered. There, indeed, displayed at their feet, and just above

them, was as fine an example as could well be discovered of the work of modern shells—of shells of huge calibre—projected by guns of such weight that weeks are required to move them, and filled with such a mass of high explosives that little can resist them. Indeed, let one of the huge projectiles sent by those German or Austrian howitzers hit fairly upon some building, and, be it a church—their favourite objective—a peasant's cottage, a convent, or even a mass of concrete and steel—such as, for instance, a modern fortress, such as, indeed, this fortress of Douaumont—and the result was likely to be little different. Destruction followed in the wake of those ponderous shells, and wreckage resulted. Here, then, before Henri and Jules, was displayed direct evidence of the wisdom which had caused General Joffre to dismantle every fort round the city of Verdun, and to convert the salient into an ordinary defensive position. A fortress might, and indeed would, be smashed by German artillery; but trenches were more movable, more replaceable, objects, and the picks and spades of *poilus* could easily repair damage.

"Nice little hole—eh?" smiled Jules. "But I don't see any sign of that German."

"Nor I. Let's get on. I've an uneasy feeling in my mind that he's up to some particularly vile sort of mischief. Let's push on," said Henri.

"And which way?"

"Which way? Any way! Straight ahead! The noise of rifles is getting closer, so that any way is likely to lead to the spot we're seeking."

"Then you think he has gone towards the fighting?" asked Jules.

"Yes!" came abruptly from Henri. "He's sneaking up behind our fellows, I feel sure. From what I've seen of this Max, this German, I feel positive that he'll think of escape last of all. To do him bare credit, he'll consider his own safety only when he's done his worst to our people. Let's push on! We've got to get to the beggar."

Glancing about them doubtfully for a second or two, they finally chose a central opening, only to be forced to turn back when they had progressed a

dozen yards, for a fall of masonry blocked egress. Returning, therefore, to the hall, they skirted the edge of that giant pit the shell had burrowed through the flooring, and entered another gallery, where, attracted by loud shouts ahead and by heavy firing, they pushed on as fast as they were able.

Meanwhile; outside, the combat had for the moment subsided, for the dash of the 20th Corps of those gallant Bretons had taken them right up to the trenches hitherto held by that thin band of noble *poilus* who had sustained and held off the first German onslaught. The Bretons, indeed, were now repairing, in furious haste, and consolidating the trenches running along the edge of the plateau of Douaumont right up to the eastern corner of the fort, almost, in fact, surrounding the fortress and cutting it off from the Germans.

Yet a portion of the works projected beyond them to the east, and there an underground passage gave shelter to the Brandenburgers, and, indeed, allowed the enemy to reinforce their troops still holding a portion of the interior. Elsewhere there was little fighting; for on the Côte du Poivre and the Côte de Talou no German attack was possible, French guns on Mort Homme and Hill 304 still commanding every avenue of approach, and already having given the Germans practical, if dreadful, evidence of their deadly work. But along the whole line shells still plunged about the positions held by our allies, and, as the snowflakes whirled and the wind swept first from this quarter and then from another, the distant thud of cannon came in one low, continuous, muttering roar, which never stopped, and which for seven days now had gone on practically without intermission.

Pushing along that gallery, stumbling over blocks of fallen stone, and every once and again coming upon the bodies of fallen Brandenburgers, Henri and Jules at length reached a part where the gallery broadened out, and where the sound of combat was louder. In the distance they could see moving figures and the flash of rifles, while every few seconds there was a dull thud or a curious scuttling noise on the walls of the gallery as bullets flew by them. Then, as they drew nearer, the faint light shed by another torch showed them a number of Bretons sheltering behind an opening which led on eastward, while others lay full length on the floor, their packs in front of them to protect them. A glance into the room on the left—a store-

room, no doubt, in which shells had been piled in other days—disclosed a number of wounded Frenchmen in the care of members of their ambulance corps, while, almost opposite, was another room packed with Bretons waiting to reinforce their friends when called for. Yet there was no sign of the German.

"Strange!" thought Henri. "Then where can he have gone? Surely he has not slipped from the fort elsewhere?"

"Hist! I thought I saw some fellow moving along there at the top of that flight of stairs," Jules said suddenly, pointing to the right just behind the room occupied by the Bretons in reserve, where stone steps led upward to another corridor, which itself gave entrance to another row of gun-chambers.

Darting to the foot of the stairway, Henri and Jules began to climb it cautiously and as noiselessly as possible; not that they had much to fear from noise, for, what with the shouts of the combatants and the sharp crack of rifles, rendered all the louder by the containing walls and masonry, there was little chance of their footsteps being heard. Then, too, there were the voices of those French reserves, those gallant and gay-hearted little Bretons of the 20th Corps, assembled in that room to their right, waiting till their comrades had cleared the way before them, or until a shrill whistle should call them to dash to the attack. The last peep which Henri had obtained of them had shown those very cheerful and collected individuals seated on the floor smoking heavily, chatting and laughing uproariously, as if, indeed, they were gathered miles away from the conflict, and as if fighting, and bullets, and sudden death were things of no consequence whatever.

"Hist!" Jules gripped his friend's arm again and pointed.

It was not so light in this higher gallery, and for a while it was almost impossible to make out their surroundings. But Jules had seen something, and presently Henri, too, caught a fleeting vision of a man's figure—a figure which stooped, and which crept along the farther wall, perhaps some fifty feet from them. More than that, there came a glimpse of the face of this individual on which a few scattered beams of the torches, smoking and flaring down below, happened to fall.

"Max! That German scoundrel!" he whispered to Jules. "What's he up to? Certainly not trying to make his escape. Let's close in on him."

They crept to the top of the stairs and along the gallery, their pulses fluttering not a little. For intuitively they realized that they had a struggle before them. And yet, judge of their disappointment, now that they had reached this higher gallery, for to all appearance it was empty. It was so dark up there that a man might have stood within ten paces of them and not have been discovered, while any sound he made would have been drowned quite easily. However, Henri pressed on cautiously, bent almost double, one hand against the wall to guide him, while Jules came immediately behind him, peering over his chum's shoulder. Then, when they had covered perhaps twenty feet or more, both suddenly stopped again—Henri so abruptly that Jules bumped into him.

"There!" Jules heard him say in a hoarse whisper, "There! See him! Watch him! What's he doing?"

Farther on, round an abrupt corner in the gallery, where it skirted the large room down below filled with Breton soldiers, there was a strange illumination, the source of light being uncertain. A moment or two later both those young Frenchmen following the tracks of that sinister German realized that a shaft led up from the room down below, and either the room itself borrowed its light from the gallery which in turn borrowed it from the embrasures and gun-emplacements on the farther side, or the shaft was merely for ventilation purposes. In any case, it was a wide affair, perhaps five feet square, and could the two of them have peered down it they would have discovered that it sloped steeply, and that, looking through it, they could see the happy fellows down below still smoking heavily, still chatting and joking, waiting patiently for the moment when their services would be called for.

And opposite that opening, peering through it, the upper part of his frame illuminated by the torches flaring down below him, was Max—Max, that sinister, dried-up, snappy German officer, who had already on more than one occasion given Henri and Jules some indication of his brutal nature. The man was gripping a heavy bag—a bag which undoubtedly required some effort to lift and handle—and, as he stood with his eyes glued

upon the men down below, was slowly extricating some object from the bundle he carried.

"What on earth is it? What's he up to?" Jules asked breathlessly. "He's taking something out of the bag, and is fumbling. Look! He's put the bag down now, and has lifted the something so as to take a good look at it. It—it's——"

"A bomb—a hand-grenade of sorts. The beggar's got a whole bag of 'em! He's——"

They watched, rooted to the spot, as the German lifted that object in one hand till the light from the room below fell upon it. And then, fumbling at its base, presently extracted something. Then they saw him stoop over the heavy bag placed on the floor, lift the flap, and commence to insert the object. It was just then that Henri realized the villainy intended by this ruffian. Perhaps you will say that "all is fair in love and war", and that Henri himself had but a little while before given the Germans an exhibition of bomb-throwing. But that was in order to save his friend about to be executed, about to be murdered, indeed, by this selfsame ruffian. Now, taking a leaf from his book as it were, this Max was preparing a load of bombs to thrust down among the Bretons.

One grenade alone might be expected, exploding amongst them, to kill numbers, but what would happen if the whole bag of them, detonated by the one he had just prepared, fell into the crowded room below and exploded? It would mean death to every man there; death to many of those outside; and might easily break down the work already done by those gallant Frenchmen, and enable the Brandenburgers to push on again into the fort and eject them. Even Henri and Jules might not escape unscathed, and Max, too, might be injured. It was, indeed, a moment for action, for swift decisive action, and, though Henri had felt rooted to the spot a moment before, any hesitation there might have been was gone in an instant. His whirling brain cleared, as it were, as need for swift movement came, and, at once bounding forward, he gripped the German by the nape of his neck and seized the hand which was lifting the bag upwards.

And then commenced a struggle in that gallery, for, to do him credit, as we have already done indeed, this German was a tenacious fighter. Making frantic efforts to throw off Jules and Henri, and to toss the bag into the room below, he staggered about the gallery with the two Frenchmen hanging to him, and then, of a sudden breaking loose, he dashed away from them. It looked, indeed, as though he would make good his escape; but Jules raced after him, while Henri dipped his hand in the bag before he moved, and then went rushing down the gallery, shouting for the German to stop and deliver himself up as a prisoner.

A sharp crack, a flash in the darkness ahead of them, and the fleeting vision of a man pointing a revolver at them followed, and then a swift movement of Henri's hand. Bringing it back over his shoulder he suddenly jerked the grenade forward, and hurled it at the German, the flash which followed lighting up the gallery from end to end, while the blast of the explosion drove the two Frenchmen backward. As for Max, that sinister German who seemed to have dogged their footsteps from the very commencement, from the days, indeed, when they were helpless prisoners in Ruhleben, the bomb made short work of him—just as short work as it would have made of those gallant Bretons. He was dead! Hoist, indeed, by his own petard!

"And one isn't sorry!" Henri said, as the two of them returned and descended the stairs to join the Bretons. "I'd sooner kill a roomful of Germans than that one Frenchman should be hurt. And here, all that we've done is to reverse the numbers. Come along, Jules, and let's get out of the fort and back to an ambulance! My head's splitting, and we shall both want rest before we can take a further part in the fighting."

No need to follow them back to that ambulance, nor to tell how those two gallant young Frenchmen, now corporals, were soon promoted to the rank of lieutenant when they returned to their regiment, and for weeks and weeks saw fighting along the Verdun salient. As we write they are still there; for German attacks surge all round the trenches on the heights of the Meuse, and, though here and there the line has been dented, Verdun, that sleepy old town down by the river, is still French, still beyond the grasp of the Kaiser.

The ruthless War Lord who caused this terrific contest to break out, who has deluged Europe and Asia and Africa with blood, and who has been instrumental in the slaughter of hosts of people, is still thwarted. True, he has gained certain yards of land—French land—the steep, sloping sides of that plateau of Douaumont, and the lower ground opposite the Mort Homme and Hill 304. But at what a price! The slopes are thick with dead Germans. Returning again and again to the attack, hounded on by their War Lord, German soldiers still advance over fields carpeted with their fallen comrades; and still French guns and gallant French *poilus* smile grimly down at them, as if to say:

"Come! Come on! Here is Verdun behind us. There is yet land to sell between these trenches and the city. Come, then! We will sell that land at a price as heavy, nay, heavier, than that which you have already paid. Come! But only so far! For Verdun is ours, and shall remain so always."

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
By Blackie & Son, Limited, Glasgow

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WITH JOFFRE AT VERDUN: A STORY OF THE WESTERN FRONT ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG™ LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are

located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project

Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to

you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg

Project Gutenberg is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the

efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 41 Watchung Plaza #516, Montclair NJ 07042, USA, +1 (862) 621-9288. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment

including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate.

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a

copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.